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OCEAN GUERRILLAS; or, The Planter Midshipman.

A Romance of Southern Shores and Waters in the Eighteenth Century.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "THE SEA DESPERADO," ETC., ETC., ETC.



INSTANTLY SHE SPRUNG TO HER FEET AND CRIED: "HO! THERE FLIES MY OWN BEAUTIFUL SEA OWL,
HO! THE SEA OWL, AHOY!" AND HER VOICE WAS SENT RINGING OVER THE WATERS.

Ocean Guerrillas;

OR,

The Planter Midshipman.

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and Waters in the Eighteenth Century.

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CHAPTER I.

THE SMUGGLER QUEEN.

A WOMAN was pacing to and fro in the cabin of a small vessel that lay at anchor in the Mississippi river, just above the, then, town of New Orleans, for the scene of my story goes back nearly a hundred years.

It is nearing the sunset hour, and the rosy rays of the descending orb penetrate the small stern ports of the vessel and fall upon the face and form of the woman as she turns in her monotonous walk, casting a halo of light upon her, which reveals distinctly every outline of her well-turned, graceful figure, and the dark, stern look that rests upon her exquisitely beautiful face, marring its loveliness with a passion that can almost be called fury.

The trailing skirts behind her as she walks, cause a rustling sound that mingles with the ripple of the waters under the vessel's stern, and these almost murmurings alone break the stillness, excepting that now and then the tolling of a bell in the distant town chimes in.

The face of the woman is a study, for it combines the loveliness of a beautiful character and perfection of feature, commingling with the reckless look that a daring youth might wear, and the sternness that would set well upon the brow and lips of a man who had met and conquered much bitterness in life.

Her hair was as black as ebony, and her eyes large, full of burning pathos and passion combined, and fringed with lashes that were long and curving, in a measure toning down the fiery soul that looked through them.

Her lips were full, red as blood, and yet her face, browned by exposure to a warm sun and winds, was colorless, the crimson tide having seemingly all surged back to the heart with the depth of some internal emotion.

A huge star of diamonds glittered beneath her throat, and upon her wedding finger gleamed a ruby set in a band of solid gold.

Now and then she would clasp her tiny hands together as she walked, and she would clutch them so tightly that it seemed as though the slender bones must snap; but no word escaped her lips; only the burning light in her grand eyes grew brighter and the cloud on her brow became darker.

The craft was a lugger yacht, of a class such as were then used by the wealthy planters for pleasure and a means of transportation to and from their plantations.

It was fitted up in luxurious style, and leaving the cabin and going on deck, one saw only a negro crew.

But every rope was coiled and in its place, the guns shone like silver, for in those days no vessel dared go unarmed, and everything indicated perfect order and discipline.

A cable's length distant from the craft's anchorage was a villa, surrounded by extensive and ornamental grounds, while in the distance was visible the Crescent City, with its spires and spacious mansions.

As the sun touched the horizon a youth came swiftly down to the shore from the villa, and springing into a light skiff sculled rapidly out to the little vessel.

He was dressed in a suit of white flannel, such as were worn by the wealthy classes, and wore a Panama hat, encircled by a silver cord.

His face was bronzed deeply, every feature was regular, and he was certainly a dashing, handsome boy, for his years were still among the teens.

As he reached the yacht a negro sailor met him at the gangway and politely touched his

hat, while the youth asked in that tone of easy familiarity that exists between the master and his trusted servant:

"Well, Woods, how is our prisoner?"
"As oneasy, massa, as a wolf in a trap, sah, for she do nothing but walk up and down."

The youth made no reply, but descended the companionway into the cabin.

The woman halted as she heard his step and faced him, her eyes fairly blazing as she turned them upon him.

"Madam, I have come to say that as soon as it is dark I will row you ashore, where I have ordered my carriage to meet you and drive you to the city," and the youth spoke with a courtly grace that was natural to him, while he held his hat in his hand.

"Why need I wait until dark, sir?"

"Do you not know that your presence is hateful to me, and that, as I cannot now strike at your heart I wish to have you out of my sight?" and her words were uttered with a ring that showed a hatred amounting to venom.

"I will tell you, lady, why I do not care to have you leave the yacht until after dark."

"It is because, in giving up your smuggler crew to naval authorities, I did not mention that I had their lady captain a prisoner, for I am not one to war against women."

"I reported the death of your father, the Smuggler King—"

"At your hands, sir!" she said, bitterly.

"I saw no necessity for saying that I had slain him, lady."

"And yet you did run your sword through his heart, before the very eyes of his daughter."

"Of that we will not speak, lady, for I simply protected my own life; but, with the smuggler chief dead, his vessels made prizes—"

"Not all of them," she said, with sudden earnestness.

"No, I believe there is one that escaped by not being at the rendezvous."

She made no reply, but smiled, a smile that, however, spoke volumes; but, unheeding it, the youth continued:

"Having broken up the band, I cared not to give you up to the authorities, so bade my negro crew not to speak of your presence on the lugger, and as I made no mention of you to either of the two midshipmen who aided me in the attack, I determined to set you free, and have now come to do so."

"Boy, I thank you for your kindness, for your act will enable me to keep my vow," and she spoke with an earnestness that was vicious.

"I understand you, Lady Captain, for you vowed to avenge your father's death; I do not fear you, though I know well that you are dangerous; but the Smugglers of the Rigolets are broken up, and your pirate husband, the Sea Ghoul, is a fugitive on land, his vessel being now a prize to the Government."

"Great God! do you mean this?" cried the woman, her voice quivering.

"Yes, lady, the pirate schooner was captured by Captain Palafox, but the Sea Ghoul was not on her, and is now said to be hiding in this city; but he will be run down as surely as you have been, and you will yet witness your pirate husband strung up to the yard-arm."

"Ha! you threaten!"

"No, lady, I make no threats; I simply assert the inevitable, and urge you to give up the lawless life you have led and to seek some sanctuary where you can hide from the world and atone for the past."

"Boy, dare not to utter such words to me, for with my father dead, and you, as I believe, a bloodhound upon my husband's track, do you think I can live and not hate you, and hating, not avenge?"

"No! no! no! my vow is registered, to some day see you dead at my feet."

The youth's face did not change a muscle at her fearful words, but he answered calmly:

"It is twilight now, lady, and by the time you are ready it will be dark enough to row you ashore and not have you seen by some curious eye that may be watching my vessel."

"I will await you on deck."

With this he bowed and left the cabin, while the beautiful woman, her face tortured into that of a fiend, thrust her hand into her bosom and half drew out a jewel-hilted dirk,

as though with the intent of springing upon him and driving it into his back.

But with a smile she shook her head and thrust the blade back again into its hiding-place, while she said, hoarsely:

"Not now, not now! I must bide my time, and one day it will come."

CHAPTER II.

THE FATAL RUNAWAY.

HALF an hour after the strange scene in the cabin of the little yacht, between the beautiful woman and the Boy Planter, for such in reality he was, a carriage was rolling along the levee road leading into the city of New Orleans.

The horses were spirited, and the driver was allowing them to take their own gait, though he held them well in hand.

They had not gone very far from the starting-point, opposite the anchorage of the yacht, when a tall form dashed out from beneath the shadow of the china trees that bordered the drive, and gave a sudden cry.

The way was lonely, and rendered darker by the overhanging trees, the negro coachman was alarmed by the sudden appearance of the man, springing from the wayside, and urged his already frightened animals along at a quicker pace.

With snorts of terror they darted forward at a mad pace, while the negro, with superstitious fears, glanced over his shoulder to behold the same tall, wiry form darting along in pursuit like a bloodhound upon the trail.

"Oh, Lordy, sabe me! it am de debbil!" cried the driver, his nerveless hands no longer possessing the power to hold the horses in check, and they fairly flew over the deserted road.

Suddenly they came to a bend, and as they swept around it at the same terrific speed, a voice from within the vehicle, and a voice that was strangely musical in its utterance, called out:

"Ho, driver! do you intend to enter the city at this mad pace?"

"Draw rein, for I care not to be dashed to pieces!"

But on the animals swept, while the negro muttered some unintelligible words about the devil or a ghost being in pursuit.

"Draw rein, sir! I command you!" then came in a stern voice from the vehicle.

But still on swept the flying team, the carriage swaying and cracking at their every bound.

"Good God! he has forced a madman to drive me, that I may be killed."

"But I will not die!" cried the occupant of the vehicle, tugging hard at the tightly-closed door, and not observing the dark form running silently and like a hound in the rear of the vehicle.

Then came another bend, and as the runaways dashed around it, the impetus sent them and the vehicle with a terrible crash against a brick wall, and then came an utter wreck, followed by silence, as all went down in a heap.

In silence the horses lay where they had fallen, but upon them lay the driver, a groan issuing from his lips.

Then up to the spot dashed the form that had so swiftly followed, the shattered door was torn open, and out stepped the occupant, while the pursuer asked, in broken tones:

"Lady no kill?"

"Ha! Chincopin, is that you?"

"Yes, me Indian."

"No, I am not even hurt, and this proves that it was not intended that I should die un-avenged, for see, there lie those mad animals and their still madder driver, and they are dead, for the negro's groans have ceased."

"But I live! I live!" and the woman, the same young, beautiful creature, last seen in the yacht's cabin, clasped her hands together, and raising them above her head, cried, in an earnest, quivering voice:

"Holy Mother, I thank thee for thy mercy, for thou hast let me live that I may bring misery upon those I hate."

With this prayer and vindictive threat commingled in their utterance, the woman turned once more to the Indian, who was bending over the driver.

"He is dead?" she asked.

"Yes, black-face man dead."

"I care not; but we must not be seen here—so come."

"Where lady go?"

"To the city, where I have work to do; but what brings you here, Chincopin, when I believed you dead?"

"No; Chincopin heap sense, so don't die, when he see big boat and plenty pale-face take lugger."

"He take black-face squaw in canoe and go."

"Ha! you saved old Selah, then?" eagerly cried the woman.

"Yes, but de black-face man dead."

"Her husband, then, was killed?"

"Yes, pale-face kill him; but black-face squaw libe, and say she have Evil Spirit kill water warriors who shoot her chief."

"By the Cross, but old Selah, the negress, shall not be alone in her hate; but I am glad she escaped, and that you were not killed in the attack, Chincopin, for I need you."

"Me here."

"But how did you get here?"

"Go with black-face squaw to island, and leave her there."

"Then big boat come and take me, and I tell water chief all about fight, and he come to help me find you."

"Do you mean that you were picked up by the lugger that was away, by Argyle?" excitedly asked the woman, grasping the arm of the Indian.

"Yes."

"Where is the lugger now?"

"Hide in lagoon on big water."

"On the lake-shore?"

The Indian nodded.

"Ha, ha, ha! this brings joy to my heart, for I shall be afloat once more, and then I can strike!" and the revengeful creature seemed fairly to revel in the thought.

Then she said, suddenly:

"Chincopin, you go to the lugger and tell Lieutenant Argyle that the Lady Captain is not dead, nor a prisoner, though her father, the Smuggler King, lies at the bottom of the Gulf, and his fleet is captured!"

"Tell him to take the lugger to her old hiding-place and there await my coming, and that I will come as soon as I can."

"Do you understand?"

"Chincopin hear."

"Now be off, and I will go on to the city; but should you have to see me, come to the Bodega Espanol and ask for Senora Rita."

"Me know—me come if want," was the laconic response, and the Indian wheeled on his heel and walked rapidly away, leaving the woman standing alone in the dismal solitude with the wreck and death, which she had escaped, before her eyes.

CHAPTER III.

THE MONEY-LENDER.

In one of the streets of New Orleans, that was by no means a fashionable quarter, a sign hung over the door of a massive, rambling old structure of Spanish architecture, which read, in English:

"DON RUDOLPHO,

"MONEY LENDER AND BUYER.

"Precious stones, old gold and silver, merchandise and odds and ends bought and sold."

In Spanish and French, as well as in English, the above information was given upon the sign, which represented a red flag, the letters being gilt.

Entering the broad doorway, one found himself within a spacious room literally piled with all kinds of merchandise, and with several doors leading from the salesroom to other parts of the house.

A dark-faced young man, evidently a clerk, stood by a counter, looking over some accounts, and started, as one who was guilty of a crime might start, when a low voice fell on his ear, asking:

"Is the Senor Rudolpho in?"

The clerk beheld before him a woman of slender, graceful form, clad in deep black, and heavily veiled.

So quietly had she entered the shop and glided up to him that he had not heard her footfall, nor the rustle of her skirts.

In answer to her question he stammered forth:

"The Don is absent, senora, just at present, but will be in this afternoon."

"I do not care to wait, so perhaps you can serve as well, for I have work to do now, and

can call again to see him," was the response in the same soft voice in which she had before spoken.

"How can I serve you, lady?"

"I need gold, and—"

"If you have the security, I can—"

"I have the security, and as I wish a few thousands at once, give me the money and keep these until I call and see Don Rudolpho, for I have business with him, too."

As she spoke she drew from the folds of her dress a buckskin bag, out of which she took several fine diamonds and placed them before the clerk, who saw that they were of great value, and were but an atom of what the bag contained.

"I can give you two thousand, lady, but no more, as Don Rudolpho has left no larger sum with me," said the man, his eyes sparkling with avaricious delight at the sight of the glittering treasure before him.

"Give me what you can, and your receipt for the gems," was the impatient response, and a few moments after, in possession of the gold, the woman glided from the shop as noiselessly as she had entered.

For some time the money-lender stood gazing at the jewels, as though fascinated by them; but at last his thoughts found utterance in words:

"Who is she, I wonder, and how came she in possession of that vast fortune in gems, for they are but a few drops in the bucket to what that bag held."

"Her form is graceful, and her voice as sweet as the notes of a flute, so I know that she must be beautiful."

"And she wishes to see the Don."

"Why, I wonder, and does he know her?"

"If he does not, *I shall*, for that woman shall never escape me."

"I have been a fool long enough, to work here, when I could be upon the seas, as in time past, winning just such jewels as those she had, even though they come to me stained with blood."

"Well, I go off duty in three hours more, and then I will track her to her home and see just who she is— Ha! here comes the Don."

As he spoke a tall man, with a slender, wiry form entered the shop.

His face was dark, his features regular, and he wore a long black beard that reached to his waist, while his hair, as black as night, fell in wavy masses upon his shoulders.

He was dressed in the height of fashion, and his nationality seemed to be that of a Spaniard; but when he advanced and spoke to his clerk no accent was observable in his words.

"A veiled lady, you say, Perdido, left these gems for the simple sum of two thousand dollars?" he asked, as he took up the jewels, five in number.

"Yes, Senor Don."

"Why, any two of them are worth that."

"I know so, senor; but I gave her what I had, and my receipt."

"And she will return; you say?"

"So said she, senor."

Don Rudolpho, the money-lender, took the gems and passed on into an adjoining room.

And a strange room it was in appearance, large, comfortable, with easy-chairs and divans scattered here and there, and the walls adorned with rare paintings, and costly curios that a king might have envied.

Throwing himself into a chair before an ebony desk, richly inlaid, he seized a quill pen and began to write.

For a long time he was thus engaged, and then, laying aside his writing materials, he buried his face in his hands and sunk into deep thought.

Suddenly the door swung open and the same woman in black, and deeply veiled, was ushered in by the clerk, Perdido.

"Be seated, senora, and command me, if I can be of service," said Don Rudolpho, rising and bowing with courtly grace, while Perdido, withdrawing and closing the door after him, stepped quickly to a dark corner, drew open a closet, and placed his ear to an aperture in the wall, which had evidently been pierced for the very purpose as an aid to eavesdropping, for which it was then used.

In response to the words of Don Rudolpho, the veiled visitor said:

"It is because you can aid me, Senor Rudolpho, that I have come to you."

"You have but to speak, lady, and I will obey," and the money-lender strove in vain to penetrate the black veil that hid the face of the woman.

"You advance money, I believe, to any amount on good security?"

"Yes, lady."

"You consider precious stones about the best?"

"They are more easily handled, lady, and always bring their worth."

"You also secure crews and vessels for sea work, I believe, without inquiry as to whether a white, blue or black flag is to fly above its decks?"

In spite of the cool nerve of the man, he started at this abrupt question; but he answered quietly:

"If you desire a vessel and a crew, lady, I can secure them for you."

"And arm the craft, too?"

"Yes, lady."

"Do you know of a fleet vessel now, of say a couple of hundred tons, that you can buy?"

"Yes, lady."

"For what price?"

"I will have to ascertain that."

"And a crew you can get that will follow a leader, lead where he may?"

"Yes, lady."

"No matter what the flag, senor?"

"The blacker the colors, lady, the more the booty for the crew," was the significant reply.

For a moment the woman was silent, and then she said:

"Senor, have you heard that the Sea Ghoul had been captured and was now in the city prison?"

Don Rudolpho again strove to pierce that impenetrable veil, but was foiled, and answered:

"I know, lady, from hearsay, that a man known as Captain Palafox, once a pirate, and now reformed and turned pirate-hunter, captured the schooner Sea Ghoul some time since; but it was said that the buccaneer chief was not on board, but on the contrary was here in the city."

"Such was the case, Don Rudolpho; but this very day the captain of the Sea Ghoul was taken prisoner, in the disguise of a French merchant of wealth, and at the house of a wealthy planter, whose daughter he was seeking to wed."

Don Rudolpho was now on his feet, his face white, while he asked in a voice that quivered with emotion, which showed that what he heard, in some mysterious way, deeply affected him:

"Can this be true, lady?"

"It is true, sir."

"You know it?"

"As surely as I know that the young planter yachtsman, Irving Brandt, attacked the Sea Owl smuggler in his retreat, killed him and many of his men, and brought his little fleet as prizes to this city."

"That I know, lady, for the city has been wild over the Boy Planter's brave deed, and the capture of the schooner Sea Ghoul; but I did not dream that the pirate captain had been taken."

"Then know it now, for it is true, and he now lies in the city *carcel*, and within the month will be hanged at the yard-arm of some Government cruiser."

"Lady, who are you?" asked the money-lender.

"I am Rita Restel, the Lady Captain of the Smugglers of the Rigoletts, who saw her father die on the deck of his own vessel, and whose husband, the Sea Ghoul, now lies in irons in the city prison."

"I am a smuggler's daughter and a pirate's bride, Senor Rudolpho," and the woman spoke with an earnest bitterness that betrayed the emotion she felt.

"Good God! now I know you!" cried the man, while the woman said, quickly:

"You know me? And how, for though I have twice before been here, it has been in disguise."

"True, I came to you once, when that same Boy Planter, Irving Brandt, captured my lugger and the booty on board."

"He freed me then, and I came to you to secure other vessels for my father, and you aided me."

"I came to you again, disguised as an old woman, when I sought your aid to dog the

steps of my pirate husband, that I might know if he was determined to cast me off, kidnap that beautiful heiress, Maud Brandt, and make her his wife.

"You aided me then, Don Rudolpho; but in Heaven's name, why do you now tell me that you know me?"

The man had at first flinched under his own words; but he had become cool again now, and said, simply:

"Lady, I knew your voice, for once heard it could never be forgotten."

She gazed straight into his face, as though striving to read the truth of his words, and then said, slowly:

"I must be careful then to disguise my voice as well as my face; but, knowing me now as the daughter of one now dead, and whose booty you have sold for years, and the wife of a man who now lies doomed in a cell, and whose agent you are, I shall expect your aid."

"With all my heart you shall have it, Lady Rita."

"How knew you my name?"

"Your father and your husband have both spoken it to me," he answered, but she did not detect the annoyance he seemed to feel at having again said something which he had wished unsaid.

"Now tell me all that I can do, lady," he continued.

"Do you remember the young man you sent with me at the time I first visited you?"

"Yes, lady, once a young planter of wealth, but who went to the bad, and drifted in my way."

"The same, and his name is Argyle?"

"Yes."

"Well, senor, he served me well, and my father made him his lieutenant, and the lugger Sea Owl which he commands, is the only craft of the smuggler fleet which was not taken."

"I ordered him to a lagoon on the lake-shore, and then went there and sent him to Mobile for repairs to his vessel, and I wish to go there, so you must find me a craft to go in."

"When Argyle's vessel is refitted, I will return here with him, and you must have the armed schooner and crew, of which I spoke, ready for me, and that cannot be any too soon, for remember, I tell you that my father is dead, and my husband in irons awaits death."

"I understand you, lady, and will not delay; but there is a vessel that sails to-night for Mobile, and you can go in her."

"I will."

"I may as well be frank with you, and tell you that she carries a rich cargo, and as her crew deserted here, I send my own men on board."

"Ah! I think I understand."

"Yes, so that you will not be alarmed at anything that may occur?"

"No."

"Then, lady, the vessel is the Vulture and lies at anchor off the foot of this street, and I will send word on board at once to have all in readiness for you, as it was not intended that she should take a passenger."

As he spoke the money-lender touched a gold bell, and in response Perdido, the clerk, appeared.

"Perdido."

"Senor Don?"

"Go on board the ship Vulture, that you engaged the crew for, and tell Captain Domineck that a lady passenger will go with him, and to have every preparation for her comfort made at once."

"Yes, senor," and Perdido left the room, and calling a fellow-clerk to take charge of the store, walked rapidly down toward the river, his face writhing with joy, as he muttered to himself:

"The same one whom I saw once to love, and then to hate, and now thrown in my power, and with her a vast fortune."

"Yes, Don Rudolpho, Perdido leaves your employ this night, and also sails on board the Vulture, and it will not be his fault that he does not get a fortune before many days."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MUTINY IN A STORM.

OVER the storm-swept waters of the Gulf of Mexico a large vessel was bounding, her way lighted across the wind-lashed waves by

the livid glare of lightning that rent the inky clouds, from which burst peal after peal of thunder which seemed to shake the sea with its startling reverberations.

It was a fearful night to be out upon the sea, and the noble vessel, under close-reefed sails, seemed to be flying on the wings of the wind to seek some haven of refuge.

Bending low one instant, to spring forward upon the top of a mighty wave the next, and then to bury herself to her decks a moment after, yet still kept on her way, held to her course by the two men lashed to the wheel, which they grasped with the clutch of iron hands.

In the cabin of the vessel a strange scene was being enacted, for a woman, apparently a young girl, and one strangely beautiful in face and form, stood at bay before five men, one of whom was the leader of the others, as his words and appearance plainly indicated.

He was dressed in a sailor suit, and his tarpaulin, worn back on his head, displayed his handsome yet evil face.

That he faced the woman with wicked intent there could be no doubt, for in his right hand he grasped a long-bladed knife, while his companions, rough-looking seamen, also looked viciously upon the one who seemed so thoroughly in their power.

One glance into the face of the woman showed that the reader again meets Rita, the smuggler's daughter, while the leader of those who confronted her was none other than Perdido, the clerk of the money-lender.

"We await your answer, Rita Restel, for upon it hangs your fate," said Perdido, sternly.

"As I understand it, you have deserted your master, and betrayed me into a trap?" said the woman.

"Yes, I was a fool to work for a salary when I could win a fortune, and you for the time crossed my path—do you remember the first?"

"Yes, I met you at Pensacola when I was at school there, and the love you professed for me turned to hate when I refused your hand."

"You were a gambler then, and believed me to be rich; you are worse now, and seek to rob me of what I possess, but I will defend that which I have with my life!"

She spoke in a cold, cutting tone, and her eyes seemed to pierce him through.

In surprise, he said:

"Your haughty words do not frighten me, Lady Rita, nor will they protect you, for I have bribed this crew, or the most of them, and they will share well in helping me get the riches you carry with you and the booty in this ship's hold."

"If it is as large a sum as I believe, I shall retire to some distant spot to enjoy my riches."

"If it is less than I hope for, why, I shall hoist the sable colors and endeavor to win more."

"Now, will you go with me as my bride and share your riches with me, or will you resist and force me to kill you?—for your life shall not stand between me and that which I will sell my soul to Satan to possess!"

The woman felt her helplessness, for she had already observed that the crew were under his influence while the captain being dead she had no one to seek aid of.

Unfortunately she had come from her stateroom, when called out by Perdido, unarmed, only having a small dirk-knife she always wore in her bosom.

Had it been otherwise—had she been armed with a pistol she would then and there have taken the mutineer's life.

Thoroughly at his mercy, she yet stood at bay, until suddenly she gave a piercing cry and sprung toward the group of mutineers, the little knife in her grasp.

Taken aback by her act, they sprung from before her, and she darted up the companion-way, hoping that some succor would come to her upon the deck.

In spite of the swaying and bounding of the vessel she sped along the deck like a hunted deer, and bounding upon the bulwarks, grasped the main shrouds.

At her back came her pursuers, but seeing her act, Perdido called out:

"Hold, men! for yonder girl carries fortunes in precious stones upon her person, and

she will throw herself into the sea and they will be lost to us forever."

At the words of their leader the mutineers paused, and just then three of the crew, inspired by the daring of the girl, and her helplessness, rushed between her and her pursuers, while one of them cried:

"Avast, there, messmates, you shall not harm the girl!"

As he spoke he sprung forward to grapple with Perdido, when full in his face came a flash that was not the lightning's vivid brightness, and the crack of a pistol followed.

Down to the deck sunk the brave tar, and Perdido bounded on, shouting to his followers:

"Beat those dogs down, men, and then follow me!"

Instantly was heard another shot or two, a clashing of steel, and the men bounded on after their leader, while one of their comrades, and the defenders of the woman lay upon the deck.

Still on bounded the stately ship, and seemingly unmoved by the strange scene transpiring upon her decks, the helmsmen stood at their post of duty.

And up the shrouds of the mainmast climbed the girl, her pursuers closely following.

Up to the cross-trees, out upon the huge yard with its reefed sail, she fled with a nerve that was wonderful in that fearful night of storm, with the vessel bounding, and the yard swaying beneath her feet.

Out to the end of the yard she went, and there came to a halt, and standing there at that dizzy height, clinging to a stay, she turned and faced her pursuers.

Perdido was nearest to her, clinging to the yard, his knife in his teeth, and behind him came the other mutineers, one on the yard near him, another in the cross-trees, and the third in the shrouds.

As they moved toward her, the daring girl shouted in tones that rose above the howling winds:

"Back, you coward mutineers! or I will spring into the sea, and bear to its depths the jewels you would kill me for."

"Back! or I take the fatal leap!"

CHAPTER V.

THE MIDSHIPMAN PLANTER.

THE home of Colonel Rupert Brandt was one of the handsomest in the Crescent City, and with its luxuries within and its grandeur without, one would have believed it hard indeed for wretchedness to enter there.

A planter, dwelling upon the shores of Mississippi Sound, a cruel chain of circumstances had driven the colonel to seek a home in the city, for one who had been the loved guest and trusted tutor of young Irving, and the lover of Maud Brandt, had mysteriously disappeared one night, and soon after a desperate pirate, known as the Sea Ghoul, was said to be none other than Bradford Carr, the one who had been so revered in that plantation home.

Driven by the pirate's persecutions to seek a home in the city, with the capture of the buccaneer schooner, the man so cruelly maligned had been found in irons on board, while his captor, the real pirate, was discovered to be a renegade planter and a discarded lover of Maud Brandt, who had kidnapped and impersonated the tutor to bring dishonor upon him, and thus gain revenge upon the beauty and heiress who had refused his love.

With this discovery joy had come again to rest upon the hearts of the inmates of the Brandt Homestead, and another cause of congratulation to them was the breaking up by the boy yachtsman, Irving Brandt, of the outlaw band known as the Smugglers of the Rigoletts.

Several days after the scene between the Boy Planter and Rita, the Smuggler Queen, in the cabin of the youth's yacht, Lady Maud, the Sea Ghoul himself had been captured in disguise as a guest of Colonel Brandt, and been taken to the city prison to await his execution.

One day, as Irving Brandt was pacing to and fro upon the broad piazza of the villa, his eyes often falling upon the lovely scene before him, and his yacht lying at anchor in the river, his thoughts were busy upon the exciting events of the past few months, and he was trying to solve the mystery of that

scene which darkness had so well shielded from view, when the frightened horses dashed to death along the avenue, and were found the next day at dawn in one muddled mass, their driver dead beside them, and the strange woman, whom the youth had placed in the vehicle, nowhere visible.

What had caused that fatal wreck Irving could not know, and where had gone that mysterious woman, whether dead or seriously hurt, he was unable to tell, and his face would darken and his brows contract as he in vain sought to solve the dread secret of that night's runaway.

Suddenly the rumble of wheels was heard along the river avenue, and a carriage wheeled into the drive leading to the villa grounds.

Banishing his perplexing thoughts, Irving stepped forward to greet the only occupant of the vehicle, a man in the uniform of a naval captain.

"Ah, Master Irving, I am glad to find you at home, for my business is with you," said the officer, alighting from the carriage and grasping the youth's hand.

"Indeed, sir?" and the youth was evidently surprised that the naval commandant of the port should seek him out.

But he invited him into the parlor, called for wine and refreshments, and then, with considerable curiosity awaited to know the nature of the business his visitor had with him.

"You know, my young friend, that after your capture of the Sea Owl's lugger some time ago, I told you that you would soon wear an epaulet?"

"Yes, sir; you were good enough to say so."

"Well, my words have come true, for I received some official letters this morning, and among them a warrant as a midshipman in the navy for one Irving Brandt, given for gallant services at sea, although a boy planter only, and not in service, and I am instructed to order the said midshipman where I deem best for duty," and the officer smiled as he saw how deeply impressed the youth was at his good fortune, for he made several attempts to speak without being able to do so.

But conquering his emotion he at last said:

"Captain Darcy, I owe this alone to your kindness, and I do not deserve the honor, for simply capturing from the smugglers my own yacht which they had taken from me."

"Well, my Planter Midshipman, you have since captured the old Sea Owl Smuggler and all of his fleet, and that the Government is not yet aware of, so you see you stand a chance of promotion already."

"No, sir, I did not capture the entire fleet, for one vessel, the Sea Owl, and said to be the swiftest craft afloat, is still free and may yet cause the Government trouble."

"Yes, I know that; but the backbone of the smugglers was broken, in the killing of their old chief, and the capture of their fleet, with the one exception, and I will order you to go in chase of that craft, as soon as your lugger yacht can be armed and manned, and I will see to it, while you go at once upon a special duty for the Government to Mobile."

"With pleasure, sir, and shall I take the Lady Maud?"

"No, for, as I said, she shall be armed and manned; but there is a large vessel that sails to-night, I learn, and you can get passage upon her, and go quietly about it, for I do not wish your going known, as the service I send you on is of a secret nature."

Irving Brandt signified his willingness to do all in his power in the matter, and, with his full instructions in his pocket, stood upon the deck of the Vulture that night as she swung free from her anchorage and headed down the river upon her voyage.

As he stood there he suddenly glanced down into the cabin and started visibly, for there, in the broad glare of the lamp, he beheld the Smuggler Queen.

"Good heavens! I must not be seen by that woman," he cried, and watching an opportunity he sought his state-room, and giving the steward a liberal fee, told him that he would be compelled to keep his state-room during the run to Mobile.

With a regret that the very liberal youth would be caused to remain below decks, on account of sea-sickness as he supposed, and promising to look after his comfort, the steward left Irving alone, with the by no

means pleasant reflection that what he had anticipated would be a most enjoyable voyage, would turn out an imprisonment in his state-room for days.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT FOLLOWED THE MUTINY ON THE VULTURE.

TRUE to his determination to remain concealed in his state-room, Irving Brandt did so, the generously paid steward seeming to alone know of his existence on board the Vulture.

The vessel was a large barque, and a good sailer and stanch craft; but, for some reason she was strangely short of hands, and the captain could count but half-a-score seamen to do the duty of double that number.

At the very last moment some of the men had deserted the ship, and, forced to sail by his owner, the captain had accepted the services of a young man presenting himself as a mate, and had put to sea with the few sailors under his command.

That the young mate was Perdido, the money-lender's clerk, the reader is doubtless aware, and having already bribed some of the men to serve him and not their captain, he at once set to work to win the others over to aid him in the seizure of the vessel.

Knowing the value of the freight carried by the Vulture, Rudolpho, the money-lender, had plotted to secure the vessel's booty for himself; but with his cunning clerk working in his own interests, and having heard all that had been said between his employer and the Smuggler Queen, the plans of the one had simply worked to the benefit of the young sailor who had so daringly determined to seize the Vulture.

The barque's captain found Perdido a good seaman, and one who seemed anxious to be constantly upon duty.

But he little dreamed of the cause of this zeal on the part of his mate, who, one by one gained the crew as his confederates in his intended lawless act, until but two seamen, the cook and the cabin steward, alone remained true, and these Perdido dared not approach.

Having laid his plans of action the mutineer mate determined upon the seizure of the vessel, and the night of the storm was selected as the one upon which the Vulture should change masters.

At the helm Perdido placed two of his own men, and then passed the word for his other fellow-mutineers to come aft.

Standing near the helmsmen, clinging to the taffrail, was the captain, little suspecting danger from his crew, and watching his stanch ship as she rushed along like a mad racer through the wild waters.

Aft came Perdido, followed by four men, and then, without a word of warning to the doomed man, he was seized and hurled overboard into the foaming wake of the driving vessel.

One long, loud cry of despair broke from his lips as he went downward into the depths; but on the ship drove and left him to his fate.

"Now, lads, that work is done, and the woman comes next," hoarsely said Perdido, and he descended the cabin companionway, followed by his cut-throat followers.

Rita, the Smuggler Queen, had heard that wild cry of the captain, and started to her feet, to suddenly be confronted by the mutineer mate.

"Oh, what has happened?" she cried dreading she knew not what.

"Lady Rita I command this ship now, for I have hurled the captain into the sea, and you are my prize."

"Holy Virgin! you are mutineers!" cried Rita.

"We are just that, Lady Rita, and pirates, too, for the ship is ours, and you are my prize."

What followed the reader already knows, for he has seen the woman, brought to bay, dash them aside and fly to the deck, and then to the yard-arm for safety, taking death in her own hands rather than meet it at the hands of the mutineer mate and his men.

It was an appalling spectacle, to behold that brave and beautiful girl standing there in mid-air in the rigging of that gallant ship, with the winds howling about her, the lurid lightning playing around her and the furious

waves leaping up in mad carnival, as though to dash her from the yard-arm, while they added their rage to make the thrilling picture more terrible and sublime.

An instant of fearful suspense rested upon all, and then out of the cabin to the deck bounded a slender form, and sweeping the scene at a glance, his eyes fell upon the storm-swept sea, the gale-driven ship, the girl in the rigging, holding at bay her pursuers, and the few seamen amidsthips gazing upward in horror.

Then up to his shoulder went a rifle, and, as the muzzle covered Perdido, he shouted, in a voice that rung like bugle-notes:

"Down to the deck, mutineers, or die!"

An instant of awful silence, as all eyes turned upon the youth, and then came in a voice that arose to a shriek, as the words left the lips of the woman at bay:

"Great God! it is the Boy Planter!"

"Never will I owe my life to him, whose life I seek,

"Never! I will die first," and with the last word she let go her hold and sprung into the sea, just as a wild shout arose forward:

"Breakers ahead! Breakers ahead!"

"Hard, hard down your helm, hard!" commanded the youth, as he beheld the foaming wall under the ship's bows.

But too late came the order, for, borne upon a mighty wave, the gallant ship, as though ashamed of the crew she bore, plunged upon the reef that barred her way, and the shock that followed brought her masts down with all their rigging, and swept her decks of every human being that stood upon them.

CHAPTER VII.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

THE instant the young midshipman saw that the ship was doomed to strike, he bounded down the companionway into the cabin, well knowing that the sea rolling astern would sweep her decks clean, while the rigging must come down under the tremendous shock.

His views were perfectly correct, for the ship was engulfed as it were for an instant, and her decks swept by the swell that rolled down upon her, while the masts, spars and rigging went down, carrying with them Perdido and his men who were clinging to the yard.

Borne on by the torrent, the wreckage left the wreck, and as soon as the volumes of water ceased from pouring through the companionway, Irving Brandt again rushed on deck.

What a scene met his gaze!

The grand old ship hurled upon the reef, and beating the bottom savagely, and in a way that showed she must soon go to pieces.

Not a mast standing, and no human being in sight!

Alone amid the ruin and savage elements, the youth stood gazing about him.

Then a flash of lightning lit up sea and sky, and a cry escaped his lips as he beheld a human being struggling out in those mad waters.

Instantly he bounded down the companionway, and in a second's time returned with a long rope, one end of which, as he darted forward, he bound about his waist.

The other end he made fast to the capstan, and then springing upon the bulwarks he again glanced over the foaming waters.

An instant of darkness, and then an instant of light, vivid, blinding light, followed by a roll of thunder that shook the very reef upon which the wrecked barque had plunged.

But in that second's glance the young midshipman had seen the same struggling form that before had caught his eyes.

It was still visible, struggling to reach the wreck, and yet being borne swiftly past.

Bounding into the sea he struck out nobly to the rescue.

From infancy almost he had been noted as a daring, tireless swimmer, and now his every energy was called into play.

A hard struggle, bold strokes, deep dives beneath the mountain waves, and he arose within a few feet of the one he sought to save.

Still struggling for life, that one was near.

ly exhausted, when suddenly the daring midgy arose on a wave so near.

But that one was the Smuggler Queen, and a cry escaped her lips as for the first time she beheld him near her, and then came her words, uttered viciously:

"Ha! you here, Sir Middy? Then I have joy in seeing you die with me!"

"No, I have come to save you, for I cannot see you die while I have the power to rescue you," he shouted back to her, and put out his hand as though to grasp her.

But instantly she threw herself back, while she raised the small knife, which she had drawn from her bosom, and cried savagely:

"Boy! murderer of my father! do not touch me, for rather than owe my life to you, I will drive this blade into my own heart!"

As the woman hissed forth the words, a curling wave struck her full in the face, and, stunned by the blow, she went down beneath it.

But Irving Brandt had seen the wave coming, and diving, had avoided its shock, while at the same time he grasped the woman firmly in his arms.

Then came the jerk as he reached the end of his rope, and for an instant he believed that it would give way; but it held firm, and lashing the woman, now wholly unconscious, to him, he began the gigantic act of dragging his weight and hers back to the wreck.

Inch by inch he made his way, his hands blistering and bleeding, as now and then a wave would force him backward; but at last he got under the lee of the ship's sides, reached the reef, crawled upon it, and then over the bows to safety, dragging the woman after him, and then falling breathless and senseless upon the deck.

Thus the two lay for some moments.

Then the woman awoke to consciousness, and seeing her position, with the midshipman's arm about her, she sprung away from him, as though he had been a snake, and dropping upon her knees a few feet distant, clasped her hands and cried piteously:

"God in heaven! I owe my life to him!"

"Yes, he has saved me! the murderer of my poor father has saved the life of his child."

"Oh God! the thought is terrible, to owe it that I live to that boy."

"But is he dead?"

She gazed in breathless earnestness upon the limp form of the youth, and then said:

"No, no, it cannot be that he is dead thus."

"No, no, not when I have lived that I may kill him and thus avenge the past."

"Ha! he moves! he lives! and right now can I drive this knife to his heart! right now can I get my revenge!"

Upon her knees she now crawled toward the prostrate youth, her right hand grasping her little dirk, her left pressed hard upon her heart, as though to still its beating.

Nearer and nearer she crept, until she bent over the youth, her hand upraised.

Then she shrunk back, still upon her knees, and cried pitifully:

"No, no, I am no coward to strike at one who is defenseless."

"I will bide my time and another time I will kill you, Midshipman Brandt, for my vow has been registered to do so."

As the woman spoke the youth suddenly assumed a sitting posture and gazed about him, and then upon her.

The winds still howled, the waves still roared, one every now and then bursting itself over the stern of the wrecked ship, and rushing forward with irresistible fury.

The woman still crouched near, her left hand yet upon her heart, her right grasping the knife she had so nearly driven into the broad breast of the youth.

In a moment he seemed to take in the situation, and said calmly:

"Are you angry because I saved you?"

"Yes; why did you not let me die, rather than owe my life to you?" she said, bitterly.

"I would not have let even that mutineer ringleader perish, could I have saved him, and certainly not you, a woman."

"Boy, how came you on this ship?" abruptly asked the Smuggler Queen, as though angry at the nobleness of his nature.

"I came on board as a passenger, to go to Mobile."

"To dog my steps?"

"Oh, no; for I knew not what had become of you, after the night I put you in my carriage to send to the city, until I saw you in the Vulture's cabin."

"Do you mean this?"

"I do."

"I have not seen you on board."

"No; I kept my state-room after seeing you."

"Then you were watching me?"

"On the contrary, I did not care to meet you."

"Did you fear me?"

"Had I done so, would I have allowed you to go free from the lugger, come to your rescue when those mutineers drove you to the rigging, and risked my life to save you a while ago?"

"No, you surely do not fear me," she said, musingly.

"Why should I?"

"Have I not vowed to kill you?"

"Oh, yes; but you will think better of that."

"Never! for I here, on my knees, upon this storm-swept deck, with God's anger raging about me, swear to one day take your life, boy," and the woman raised her hands upward as though calling upon Heaven to register the fearful vow she made.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE STORM.

To the woman's vehement vow against his life, Irving Brandt made no response, but rising to his feet, and still suffering from his violent exertions, he walked as far aft as he dared, to note just how long the wreck would last.

Rita remained where he had left her, crouching beneath the shelter of the windward bulwark, and her eyes upon the youth, whenever a flash of lightning enabled her to see him.

"The wreck will soon go to pieces under this fearful thumping, and then it will be another swim for life, with the chances all against us," he muttered, as he felt the tremendous shocks beneath his feet, as the hull rose and fell upon the waves.

"Every boat has been torn off; but a raft might be made, if that stubborn woman would help me."

"The island lies yonder, dead over the bows, and if we could make the raft fast, let a wave sweep it over the reef, we could then swim to it and take our chances at reaching the land."

"Well, I can but try her."

Walking forward again, the midshipman halted near the woman and said:

"You certainly do not wish to die, do you?"

"No, I wish to live for revenge," was the quick retort.

"Well, whatever your motive may be, lady, if you are willing to help me, I believe we can save ourselves."

"Save yourself, boy, and leave me to my fate."

"No, I can save myself only with your aid."

"How?"

"The hull is pounding itself to pieces."

"I hear that."

"It cannot last more than a couple of hours at furthest, and together we can build a raft."

"Of what?"

"There is ample rope in the hold, and the state-room and cabin doors, with a few extra spars below decks, will serve our purpose."

"The raft will not go against this sea."

"We can launch it, made fast by ropes and watching our chance for a high sea, let it go over that reef."

"Then we can swim to it, and, if I remember right what reef we are on, it is only a league to the island."

"You are a brave youth and I wish I did not have to look upon you as my foe," she said, softening a little.

"Well, for the present we must work as friends."

"Will you help me?"

"Yes."

"Then you tie the spars together as I bring them up on deck."

The woman arose and followed him to the spot amidships which he selected as the place to launch his raft, and the work was

begun, both working harmoniously together, but in silence, except it was necessary for one or the other to speak.

In less than an hour the raft was completed, and a stanch affair it was.

Then Irving Brandt seized an ax and began to cut away the bulwarks, while the woman made the raft fast to the bows with long ropes.

At last the opening was made, and then provisions were brought from below and lashed on, and a huge wave, flooding the decks, bore the raft off upon its bosom, and thus on over the foaming reef right through the breakers.

The ropes tightened with a loud twang, and then Irving cried gleefully:

"Now we must go, for so far all has worked well."

"You go first."

"No, I will not leave you," firmly responded the midshipman.

"I am a good swimmer."

"It matters not; we go together."

There was something in the youth's manner that commanded obedience, and seizing a rope she lowered herself over the bows, down upon the reef, where she stood waist-deep in water.

Instantly Irving followed, and said simply:

"Now come!"

A wave, larger than usual, came sweeping along, and rising upon its crest, they were swept clear over the reef.

"Look out for the raft, that you do not strike it too hard!" cried Irving, and a moment after he grasped it, and throwing his arm about the woman, dragged her on board.

She shrunk from his touch, but unheeding her act, he quickly severed the lines, and the raft drove shoreward at a terrific pace.

Watching with the lightning flashes the midshipman soon beheld the land ahead, and cried, as he caught a fair view of its outline:

"It is as I thought, the Witches' Isle; but we can land, though not without danger."

"It is said that the island is haunted," remarked the woman, with a shudder.

"Well, if it is not now it soon will be by us."

"Do you not believe in witches, boy?" angrily asked the woman.

"No, nor in ghosts; but I have heard many strange stories told of yonder island by men who I do not think would intentionally deceive me," answered Irving, who though utterly fearless, was yet not wholly free from the superstitions that ruled that age, when our revered ancestors were mostly firm believers in spooks and witches, the evil eye and mysterious charms.

Suddenly, as the raft went driving shoreward, there came a mighty crash astern, and Rita cried out:

"That ends the ship."

"Yes, she has gone to pieces; you see that we were none too soon in leaving," was the cool reply of the midshipman.

"And again I owe you my life," was the bitter reply.

"And will again, unless you are a bolder swimmer than I think, for hark how the surf beats yonder on the island."

"Yes, it is too wild for the craft to land."

"Then we will anchor until the sea runs down, for you see I brought a mud-hook."

"Yes, you have your wits about you in danger, that is certain; but see! there is a light upon the island!" and the Smuggler Queen pointed to a pale-green light that was visible dead ahead.

"It is doubtless a ship's green lantern; some one is there before us."

"But who?"

"Perhaps the mutineers."

"They were in the rigging when the crash came and were swept with it into the sea, so could have no lantern."

"True; then I do not know who it is."

"Perhaps it is the witches' light, for see how green it is."

"Yes."

"Boy, we are doomed," said the woman, impressively.

The youth made no reply, but kept his eyes fixed upon the strange, weird light.

Suddenly it moved to and fro, then in a circle round and round, and then began to dance up and down, while right in the face of the storm came to the ears of those two

on the life-raft a burst of mocking laughter.

"Holy Virgin protect me!" groaned the Smuggler Queen, while Irving Brandt said sternly:

"What heartless wretch can laugh on such a night?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE WITCHES' ISLE.

THE small anchors which Irving Brandt had taken the precaution to put on the raft, were thrown out; but they did not hold, and were dragged rapidly shoreward.

Nearer and nearer the shore the raft approached, until the midshipman saw that the shock must soon come, and said:

"It will be a rough landing here, but we must free ourselves from the raft, and try it."

"Must I again owe my life to you?" hoarsely said the woman.

"Oh, no! for you are a superb swimmer, I noticed, and can reach the shore; but you had better follow in my wake."

"Ha! there is that strange light again."

"Is it a warning for me not to accept life at your hands?"

"If so, what warning does it give to me?" coolly asked the youth.

"It warns you not to save my life," was the quick response.

"Well, warning or not, I'll not have your death on my hands, if it is in my power to save your life."

"Better not help me, boy, for you have heard my vow, and I will keep it."

The youth made no reply to her threatening words, but after a moment said:

"Come, we must leave the raft."

Without hesitation she obeyed, and the two sprung into the sea, for the raft was already in the surf.

Rapidly they were driven shoreward, the midshipman keeping close by the side of the woman, and watching for the best place to land.

Suddenly he saw Rita throw her hands above her head and utter a cry.

Instantly he seized her, and found her a dead weight in his arms.

"Ha! that piece of timber was dashed against her," he cried, as a piece of the wreck touched his hands.

Then he made a bold and giant struggle for life, and though buffeted about, submerged, and hurled forward with fearful force, he reached the shore at last, and dragged himself and his burden beyond the cruel fury of the waves.

A few stunted pines grew upon the bank near, and thither he carried the woman, exhibiting a strength one would not have believed he could possess.

Laying the slender form down he knelt by her side to see if she was severely injured, when she said faintly:

"I am all right; but something struck me and knocked me breathless."

"You have saved me again!"

"There was not much saving, for we were tumbled ashore together in fine style; but, as you are all right, I will see if I can drag the raft out."

"And I will help you," and the woman, whom he had believed seriously hurt, sprung to her feet and followed him down to the shore.

The raft was there, and going to pieces; but the two dragged it ashore and managed to save the things lashed upon it.

These were borne up to the shelter of the cliff and trees, and then the woman sunk down, utterly worn out, while the youth set to work gathering wood, and soon had a pile of fagots ready to light, when the Smuggler Queen called out:

"What! do you intend to light a fire?"

"Yes, for I have some tinder and flint here in an oil-skin bag, and in this little ravine you can find a safe retreat, while I get together the things from the raft."

"But the light?"

"What light?"

"The one we saw."

"Oh! I don't mind that; and we need to dry our clothes and get some rest."

The fire soon blazed up brightly, and the midshipman unrolled some bedding that had been securely wrapped up in oiled canvas and thus had kept dry.

Some clothing for both had also been thus

kept from getting wet, and the Smuggler Queen threw some dry wraps about her and lay down to rest.

Utterly worn out she sunk to sleep immediately, and Irving Brandt at once walked noiselessly away from the fire.

"I don't like that light myself; but I will see who held it," he muttered, as he went up on the bank and stood glancing over the island.

It was a wild, rugged spot, rolling here and there, high in the center, and clad with a growth of stunted trees.

He had landed at one end of the island, and marked the spot where he had seen the weird light, so thither bent his steps.

Fear the youth did not know; and yet, in those days of superstition, especially among those who followed the water, he could not but feel a certain dread of the spot where it was said witches had held their haunt for years.

Following the curve of the shore, he went slowly along toward the point where the light had been seen.

"They say that no one ever sets foot on this island and lives, unless he comes here to consult the witches as to the future."

"They also say that pirates land here to ask the curse of the witches upon their pursuers, and to get charms to protect and give them luck."

"Some say," went on Irving Brandt, musing aloud as he walked, "that a vessel was driven on here long years ago, and all souls perished excepting one woman, a witch whom they had on board in irons, and were sending from England to exile to America, as they did not dare kill her."

"This old witch willed it to wreck the craft, and she alone, in irons, lived, and still lives here, it is said."

"Well, I'll soon know just what power the old hag has," and then he came to a sudden halt, for up a ravine some distance off, was visible the same weird, greenish light.

"There it is," he muttered, as he turned into the ravine.

It was a cut leading back into the island, and had evidently been washed by the rain torrents seeking an outlet in the gulf.

Following the ravine the boy kept his eyes upon the light.

It was now stationary, and had a pale green halo about it that he could not account for.

But, with that light in sight, he was determined to know just what it meant.

A walk of a couple of hundred yards brought him to a clump of pines, before which, sixty feet away, arose a cliff.

In this cliff was a cavern, and the light came from within, and what it revealed filled the midshipman with a feeling of horror.

On either side of the cavern, which had evidently been dug into the earth, stood a ghastly sentinel, for *they were skeletons*.

Around the edge of the cabin was a fresco of human thigh-bones crossed, and with a grinning skull alternating, the center-piece being a huge owl.

Within the cavern was suspended the lamp that cast forth such a bright, greenish glare, and its rays fell upon a scene that caused the midshipman, brave as he was, to quickly turn and fly from the ghastly sight, while, as he darted away, a burst of mocking laughter was heard and then the deep bay of bloodhounds as they rushed in hot chase upon the track of the mortal who had dared place foot upon the Witches' Island.

CHAPTER X.

ADRIPT.

"COME! for the love of God! we will be torn to pieces if we remain here—hark!"

Such were the words that broke from the lips of the young midshipman, as he dashed into the ravine where lay the Smuggler Queen, asleep.

His words were startling enough, and she awoke in alarm, to suddenly hear shriek after shriek filling the air.

There were heard voices then, human, brute and bird commingling, for wild cries in the tones of despairing men joined in with the deep growls, and savage yelp, of hounds, while the hoot of an owl and startled notes of a sea-hawk added to the fearful chorus.

In spite of her nerve the Smuggler Queen

was almost paralyzed with terror, and uttering no remonstrance she was led swiftly along by the youth.

"Where are you going?" she gasped, as they sped along the sandy shore.

"Anywhere, so that we can place distance between us and what I saw back yonder."

"And what did you see?"

"Do not ask me, but hark to yonder cries!"

"They are the despairing cries of men, mingling with the baying of hounds and shrieks of night-birds."

"Oh, what does it mean?" said the Smuggler Queen.

"It means that this is indeed the Witches' Isle— Ha! see, a boat! a boat!"

They had suddenly come upon a little cove, or inlet, narrow and deep, penetrating the island, and there before them was moored a boat.

It was painted white, not large, but of a build that showed it to be a surf-skiff, and the youth quickly aided the woman into it, and sprung in after her.

But not an instant too soon, for as he grasped the oars and shot away from the shore, two greenish lights were seen coming like wind along the beach, directly for the spot which they had just left.

"They are bloodhounds, and they carry those green lights about their necks," said Irving, and he bent to his oars with vigor.

Watching the hounds, they saw them halt at the water's edge, and then give vent to long, deep howls of disappointment and rage.

The shrieks and howls back in the ravine had now ceased, and only the baying of the two hounds could be heard, mingling with the roar of the surf.

Down the inlet the youth urged the skiff, which began to toss upon the waves as it neared the sea, and for some time no word was spoken; but the woman broke the silence with:

"What does all this mean?"

"Heaven only knows."

"Do you intend to remain on the island?"

"Not for the world."

"Where will you go?"

"Out into the Gulf."

"In this boat?"

"Yes, for it is a surf-skiff and will live."

"I am so glad to hear you say so, for I would not put foot on that Island for worlds," earnestly said the Smuggler Queen.

"Nor I, for I saw enough to feel that it is indeed the haunt of witches, if not of devils, and I fled back to you, not knowing where we could go, or what to do to escape."

"But we are safe now."

"With yonder surf before us?" and the Smuggler Queen pointed to the walls of foam before them.

"Yes, it is safer in yonder wild seas than behind us," was the significant reply, and the midshipman headed the skiff directly for the wild breakers.

On and into them went the frail boat, tossed here, tossed there, half-filled with water, and then emerging in safety into the sea beyond, which was rapidly running down, for the storm had ceased and the waves no longer sprung in angry fury toward the sky.

Bailing the boat out as best they could, the youth again took the oars and rowed hard and fast, as though anxious to place as much space as possible between him and the island before dawn.

Thus hours passed away, Irving Brandt keeping up a steady stroke, and refusing to allow the woman to relieve him at the oars.

At last the dawn appeared, and the woman was asleep in the bottom of the skiff, worn out, human nature having forced her to succumb.

Casting his eyes around the horizon, Irving discovered the island leagues away, and, even in the increasing light of day, shuddered as his eyes fell upon the spot where he had seen such a ghastly spectacle.

The hulk of the Vulture could not be seen, so he knew that it had gone to pieces.

Then, turning his eyes in another direction, he started as they fell upon a sail.

It was a trim-looking lugger, not very far distant, and it carried a flag which he could not discern distinctly, but it had a sable look in that dismal gray light, and those were

dangerous waters, and it might be that the vessel was a pirate or a smuggler.

If either, his sleeping companion would have nothing to fear, while he would have everything to dread, so he concluded neither to attract the attention of those on the vessel, or to awaken the woman.

Unseen by the lookout on the lugger, Irving determined to remain so if he could, and taking in his oars, he quietly slipped down in the bottom of the skiff.

The course of the vessel was bringing her nearer and nearer, and as the sun rose out of the waters, its rays revealed distinctly the flag—a black field with a huge red owl in the center.

"It is the very lugger that escaped capture in the Sea Owl's Nest, and Heaven grant the lookout does not see us, or I am lost," he murmured, and he glanced anxiously toward the sleeping woman.

But as his gaze fell upon her she moved restlessly, then muttered something unintelligible, and then her eyes opened.

She started as she saw him, and then, passing her hand across her face once or twice, seemed to take in the situation, and said wearily:

"I have been asleep, while you have worked."

"Yes; and sleep will do you good, so get all that you can," and Irving dared not glance toward the lugger.

"No, I will watch now while you sleep, for some vessel may come in sight."

"I do not care to sleep," he said.

"Do you fear to trust me?"

"How do you mean?"

"Do you think I would kill you in your sleep?"

"Oh, no; I had not given it a thought; but let me urge that you lie down again."

"No," and she sat up and looked around her, when her eyes fell upon the vessel now not more than a mile away.

Instantly she sprang to her feet and cried: "Ho! there flies my own beautiful Sea Owl."

"Ho! the Sea Owl, ahoy!" and her voice was sent ringing over the waters.

Her form had now caught the eye of the lookout, and the lugger's sharp prow was at once turned toward the skiff.

"Now I am saved!" cried the Smuggler Queen, joyfully.

"And I am doomed!" responded the young midshipman, in a voice that showed he knew his danger.

CHAPTER XI.

TWO STRANGE PLEDGES.

THE little vessel that had been sighted by the midshipman and the Smuggler Queen, and which gave hope to the woman and despair to the youth, was one of the trimmest built crafts of her class.

She had the clean look of a yacht and carried an immense spread of canvas.

Built by a Spanish Don for his own pleasure, she had been cut out of Pensacola harbor by the Queen Smuggler and given to her father as a carrier of smuggled booty, while, absent from the retreat at the time of Irving Brandt's attack upon it, she had escaped capture.

As the pretty vessel neared the skiff there were seen to be a number of men upon her decks, while aft, near the helmsman, was a young man, evidently the commander.

He was looking at the occupants of the skiff through a glass, and when near enough hailed:

"Ho, the surf-boat!"

The midshipman did not reply, but glanced toward the woman, who answered:

"Ahoy the Sea Owl!"

A cheer broke from the crew of the lugger as the woman's voice reached their ears, and the young officer shouted:

"Bravo, Lady Captain, you are welcome on board the Sea Owl!"

Luffing up sharp the lugger lay to, while her commander called out:

"Seize your oars, young man, and come alongside!"

But Irving Brandt did not move, and Rita took the oars and obeyed.

Over the side she went, and her hand was warmly grasped by the smuggler captain, who then turned to the midshipman.

Instantly he started back, turning deadly pale, as he cried:

"Irving Brandt!"

"Yes, I am Irving Brandt, and you are Chester Granger, who it seems has turned pirate," was the cool response.

"Good God! I would not have had you see me on this deck for worlds, that you could tell what I have become!" and the smuggler spoke with bitterness and the deepest feeling.

"Do not trouble yourself, Mr. Granger, as that young man will never live to say that he has seen you on a smuggler deck."

"He is a prisoner, and shall be put in irons," said the Smuggler Queen, coldly.

"A prisoner?" asked Chester Granger, while Irving Brandt simply smiled at the words of the woman.

"Yes, a prisoner; for, though we were fellow-passengers on a vessel that was wrecked on Witches' Isle last night, and he saved my life more than once, still he is a prisoner, for he it was who attacked our retreat and killed my father."

"He killed the Sea Owl?"

"Yes, before my eyes, and never will I forget it; but put him in irons, for he is doomed to die," and the wicked look that came into the eyes of the Smuggler Queen fairly appalled the outlaw lieutenant.

But he ordered the midshipman seized and ironed, and then calling the Smuggler Queen into the cabin, asked:

"Lady Captain, what of your husband?"

"He lies in prison, condemned to die, and having ordered you to Mobile to repair the vessel, I sailed for that port to see you."

"And how can I serve you, lady?"

"My husband shall not die."

"Not if he can be rescued, lady."

"He shall be."

"For your sake I hope so," was the low reply.

The woman seemed to read a hidden meaning in the words of her officer, and said:

"Mr. Granger, for now I know such to be your name, I have found you all that I could wish as an officer, and I need your aid, though it is perhaps wrong to ask it."

"Why wrong, lady?"

"Because I know that you and my husband were once friends, and that you lay at his door what you have become."

"True, all that I now am Barton Keys made me," was the bitter reply.

"I know that my husband plotted with you, yes, forced you to aid him, in a scheme to get rid of one rival for the hand of Maud Brandt by death, and have another rival hanged for the other's murder."

"The death of one followed, and the other, Bradford Carr, the tutor of the boy in irons on that craft, would have been strung up, had he not escaped."

"Escaping, he took to the sea and became a pirate-hunter, and you, forced to fly for your life, had become a rover and was captured by the very man you had aided my husband to so cruelly wrong."

"To save yourself you confessed all, and Barton Keys became the outcast and outlaw."

"But, all that he is, I love him, and he is my husband, and shall never die."

"I know that he has sworn to avenge himself on you for betraying him, and yet, knowing it, I ask you to help me save him from the yard-arm."

"My father is dead, his fleet, excepting this vessel, captured, and my poor husband, with his schooner a prize, lies in prison awaiting death at the yard-arm."

"But I do not give up, for with this craft in the lake to aid us, an armed schooner in the river, and a fortune in jewels to sacrifice if need be, I will save Barton Keys."

"But you must aid me, and in return you shall have this lugger, ample reward besides, and can raise the smuggler's flag as your own, and it will soon lead you to fortune."

"And you, lady?" asked the young man, in a tone that showed that inwardly he was deeply moved from some cause.

"I will go with my husband, who will seek a home elsewhere, I hope."

"But will he?"

"I believe it, I hope it."

"I fear not, lady."

Rita bit her red lips viciously for an instant, and then said:

"Well, if he still floats the black flag, I shall not desert him."

"And if you cannot save him, Lady Captain?"

"But I must."

"Suppose that you should not?"

"By the Cross, then will I hoist the skull-and-cross-bones flag, and woe be unto all who have had a hand in the death of brave Barton Keys, the Sea Ghoul."

Her voice rung like clanging metal, and her eyes shone with a brightness that seemed fairly to burn the smuggler officer as she turned them upon him.

But he spoke not for an instant, and then said:

"Lady Captain, you ask me to aid you to save Barto, the Buccaneer, as Barton Keys is called, from the yard-arm."

"If I do so, I ask nothing in return, and shall go my way alone; but, should he die, though I make every effort to rescue him, I claim your hand as my bride, even though I get not one particle of your love with it."

She turned upon him like a fury, and seemed about to hiss forth scathing words of scorn; but checking herself from some sudden inward impulse, she said softly:

"Do you pledge yourself by the Cross you revere to do all in your power to rescue him?"

"I do faithfully so pledge myself, lady."

"Then you can do no more, Chester Granger, and should you fail, should Barton Keys die at the yard-arm, the day that he does I will become your wife, but upon one condition."

"Name it, lady."

"That you devote your life, with mine, to avenge him," was the low, trembling response.

"I accept the condition."

"Enough! now head the lugger for the old retreat, where we can find material to so disguise it, that she can lie at anchor in the lake as an honest craft," and with a bow Chester Granger left the cabin, and the strange woman, for whom he held a fascination he could not shake off.

CHAPTER XII.

THE THREAT.

To the rendezvous, where so long the old Smuggler King, known as the Sea Owl, had defied capture and eluded the law-hawks constantly in search of him, the lugger went, and Rita herself stood at the helm and piloted her into the inner lagoon.

A torrent of bitter thoughts swept over her as she once more beheld the old scenes, for there years of her girlhood had passed.

Her father, once a planter on the river coast of the Mississippi, had gone to the bad, and, forced to fly, had turned smuggler, carrying with him his only child, Rita, an old negro and negress who clung to him in his downfall, and an Indian, Chincopin, whose life he had saved long years before.

In his retreat he had hidden away, and his fleet little vessels, seen only at night, and manned by daring crews, had gained the name of the Sea Owl for him and made him famous as the Smuggler King.

Rita, reared in this atmosphere of crime, danger and recklessness, had grown into her teens, and then been sent to school in Pensacola, where she kept the secret well of who she was.

Returning to the old haunts, she had been covered with precious gems by her loving father, petted and admired, until she became known as the Smuggler Queen, and the acts of daring she had done, with her perfect knowledge of seamanship, had well earned for her the title.

One night, in her little skiff, she had been crossing an inlet, when she came upon a drowning man.

Quickly she had saved him, to find that it was Barton Keys, then flying for his life, having escaped from jail, where he was lying under sentence of death for the murder of a rival, and whose murder he had laid at the door of Bradford Carr, the tutor of Irving Brandt.

Carrying him to her father's vessel hidden away in the lagoon, Rita Restel had prevented the Sea Owl from killing the man she had rescued, as he wished to do, and from that night, her love, never before awakened, sprung into being and budded into idolatrous worship.

Wedding the outlaw girl, Barton Keys had turned pirate, and carried her to sea with

him but well Rita knew that his old love, Maud Brandt, was constantly in the thoughts of her husband, and that she was an unloved wife.

Yet still she clung to him through all, until the end came in the killing of her father, capture of his fleet, the bringing of her husband's schooner into port as a prize, and then his being discovered as a pretended French merchant and being thrown into prison, to die for his crimes.

All these thoughts crowded upon the Smuggler Queen as she stood on the shore, watching the transforming of the pretty lugger into a plantation *drogher*.

And more, the thoughts crowded upon her of what was before her, in seeking revenge upon Irving Brandt, the young Planter Midshipman, and the rescue of her pirate husband, or visiting fearful vengeance upon his executioners.

Rita was of a nature as revengeful as an Indian's without the gratitude a red-skin might feel for one who, though injuring him, had yet done him a kindness.

She hated Maud Brandt because her husband loved her, and she hated Irving Brandt, because he was the foe of all outlaws and had slain her father before her eyes.

What Maud might feel as a pure woman, against her former lover turned pirate, she did not care, any more than she did what her father had been, and that he was seeking the life of Irving when he lost his own.

He had fallen, and the midshipman was his slayer, and that called for a life for a life in revenge.

That same slayer of her father had set her free, when he might have sent her to prison, he had saved her life that fearful night of wreck on the Witches' Isle, yet she felt no softening in her heart toward him, and vowed in her heart, as she stood there on the shore, that she would strike her revengeful blow at him before another sun had risen.

"Ha! I have it! I know what my revenge shall be against him!" she suddenly cried, in a voice that awakened the echoes of the forest, and springing into her boat she pulled rapidly to where the lugger lay against the other shore.

"How long before you can sail, Senor Granger?" she asked, excitedly.

"Within the hour, lady; but have you news of any kind?" asked the lieutenant, struck by her manner.

"No, but get under way at the earliest moment, for I not only wish to reach the city as soon as possible, but also to visit my retribution upon that accursed boy whom I have sworn to destroy."

"Will you kill him?" asked the smuggler.

"Worse! yes, I will leave him to a fate worse than death," was the hard answer of the woman, as she descended into the cabin, while Chester Granger muttered:

"Poor Irving! Oh! that I dared to save him!"

"But no, it cannot be, it cannot be!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A WEIRD SUPERSTITION.

Few seamen would ever realize, in looking at the clumsy-appearing craft sailing along on the blue waters of the Gulf, that under the disguise of a plantation *drogher*, she possessed the graceful curves of a yacht, hidden beneath a false bow and stern, and could spread, in place of the ill-fitting patched sails, far too small for her spars, a mass of snowy canvas that would be enough for a vessel of twice her tonnage.

It certainly was a complete metamorphosis from the little Sea Owl, and the neat dress of her crew had given place to a rough attire that was as unbecoming to them as was the blackened and torn sail to the craft.

Standing at the helm was Chester Granger, a far-away look in his really fine eyes, as his gaze rested listlessly upon a distant island.

Presently out of the cabin came Rita, the Smuggler Queen.

Her dress was the same, her beautiful face unchanged.

"Ah! there is the island," she said, as her glance fell upon it, and addressing the smuggler lieutenant.

"Yes, lady, it is the Witches' Island, and

this is the first time I ever knew of a vessel's prow being steered directly for it," was the answer.

"Do you fear to go there?"

"All men do, lady, and I was surprised when you bade me hold our course there."

"Are you a believer in witches, Lieutenant Granger?"

"I believe in those who have told me strange stories which I cannot doubt, of witches and spirits; and see, every man on board this vessel has the same dread, for you observe how nervous they are, and how they talk together in low tones?"

"Yes, but why have they any fear now?—for see, the sun is yet above the horizon," and she pointed to the sun, fast nearing the watery horizon.

"True, but darkness is not very far away, and the men fear to see strange sights on yonder island."

"I shall not land there, Granger."

"Ah! I am glad to hear that, lady: let me change our course, then," and he gave the helm a slight push to port, when the Smuggler Queen caught his hand and cried:

"Stay, for our course lies yonder to that island, Senor Granger, though I do not intend to land there."

"Then why go there, lady?"

"There is one on board this vessel who must land there."

"Ha! do you mean it, lady, to put that poor boy upon that witch-haunted island?" cried Granger, divining her revengeful purpose.

"Yes, for that *poor boy*, as you called him, was the one who took my father's life."

Granger made no response, but his thoughts were busy.

To change the decision of the woman he knew would be impossible, and though he longed to help Irving Brandt, he dared not do it.

He feared the woman, and yet loved her, while he was also fascinated by her, and she held an influence over him which he could not shake off, even had he so desired.

In silence he stood, waiting for her to speak again, when, seeing the men coming aft in a body, he said quickly:

"See, Lady Captain, the men are coming aft."

"Can they mean mischief?"

"It seems so, and I will get arms," she said coolly, and she started for the cabin, when suddenly up the companionway from within sprang a form, and it was closed in her face, just as the men in a body confronted the woman and the lieutenant on the deck.

"Ha! what does this mean, men?" cried Granger, sternly, looking over the serious faces of the dozen men before him, while he drew Rita back toward the helm.

"Yes, what mischief is brewing here, that you come aft like mutineers?" said the Smuggler Queen, putting on a bold front, though she was wholly at the mercy of the crew, as she knew, for neither was the lieutenant or herself armed.

"Lady Captain, we came to ask you if you know what yonder island is?" said one of the men, stepping forward as spokesman.

"Yes, it is called the Witches' Island by some, by others the Haunted Isle," she answered, with assumed indifference.

"It is said that the vessel that heads purposely for yonder island, lady, unless she carries a black flag at her peak as a pirate, is doomed, and yet you, with no such flag, steer for it."

"Yes, I have business there."

"Ah, lady, what business can you have in going where you doom us to death?"

"No, no, it cannot be, it shall not be, and we will take the helm and put away."

"Never! stand back, sir!" and Rita's eyes flashed fire.

The man paused, but said firmly:

"Lady, beware, for it is further said that to save a vessel from doom, that has sailed the course that this one does, two of her crew must be sacrificed."

"What mean you, Sir Mutineer?" and both the woman and her lieutenant paled, though they still held a bold front.

"I mean, Lady Captain, that it is said that two must be sacrificed, one from forward, the other from the cabin."

"Need I say that you are from the cabin, and the lieutenant bunks forward?"

The words were too significant to misunderstand, and the Smuggler Queen said, in a voice that had lost none of its ring:

"Men, I meant not to land on yonder island, but only to go near and leave to swim to it the one who is now my prisoner below decks."

"That is cruel even to a foe, lady, and your not going there does not alter our doom, for the legend says the craft that lays her course for it, and this vessel has done so, and we must make the sacrifice, and you and the lieutenant must be the victims to save the rest of us."

The words fell appallingly upon the ears of the two victims thus selected to save the others.

They knew well the fearful superstition that ruled men who followed the water, and more especially men with the brand of outlaw upon them; but, determined to place another meaning upon their act, and fearless to the last, the Smuggler Queen cried:

"Down, mutineer dogs that you are, and beg mercy of your Smuggler Queen, for it is to possess my jewels that you seek to slay me, and not that you have dread of yonder island."

"Go! and force me not to show the power that I possess to force you to obey!"

Momentarily the men were awed by her look and words, and some of them shrunk back, as though fearing that she might possess some supernatural power they knew not of.

But their leader did not flinch, and springing forward grasped the Smuggler Queen by the arm, while he cried to his comrades:

"Seize them, lads, for their lives shall be sacrificed to save our own!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OUTLAW NEGRESS.

NEVER in his life had Irving Brandt felt that he was in greater peril, than when he was put in irons and confined below decks on the lugger, wholly at the mercy of the woman whose life he had again and again saved.

He had not believed her capable of her act, in putting the manacles upon him, and throwing him into the hold, after what he had done for her.

He had been in dangers by sea and land, had seen moments when hope was almost gone from him, and yet would hope hold out a spark that death would go from him.

But now, when a revengeful woman had made up her mind to sacrifice him, what could he hope for?

No ray came to him that mercy would visit her heart, and he calmly nerved himself to die, if so she willed, and to meet the worst with a fearless mien, even though he stood upon the very threshold of what had promised to be a brave and noble manhood.

In this dark prison-place he mused away the hours, fed at meal-time by the old negress who had been Rita's nurse from infancy.

She was an ugly-faced old woman, who cultivated a witch-like look in its worst phase, and as Irving had a good look at her features, by the light of the lantern she brought with her, he felt that she too was merciless.

One day she surprised him by saying:

"Pity you kilt ole massa, chile."

"He deserved a worse death for his crimes than to die as a brave soldier or sailor loves to die," sternly responded the midshipman.

"Tink so, chile? Well, maybe he were bad man to many, but he good to me."

This Irving did not contradict, and the old negress seeming to be in a talkative mood, continued:

"Is you 'feerd to die, massa?"

"No, but I do not wish to die, with the future all before me."

"Dat so, chile, dat so; but Missy Rita gwine to kill you."

"I believe that she is heartless enough to do so."

"Guess you don't recommembers me, does yer, massa?"

"No."

"Jist take a good look at my complecshun, an' see," and she held the lamp up as complacently as though there was something in her face to admire.

"I do not remember you, and yet your face is familiar."

"I recommembers you, young massa."

"Indeed! have we met before?"

"Yes, massa."

"Where?"

"I has blessid mem'ry, chile, and I doesn't forgit you, an' I hain't gwine ter, nohow."

"Where have we met?"

"Does yer recommemmer one day when yer yacht, de Lady Maud, was anchored in de ribber fronting de city?"

"She has been anchored there often."

"Dis was special 'casion, massa, and you was on de deck, and a big ship run down leetle boat wid two ole niggers in it."

"Ah, yes, I do remember you now, for you are the old auntie I pulled out of the water."

"Truf! Gospil truf, honey, I is dat same ole 'oman, an' I hain't forgittit it nuther."

"Yas, you did jump right inter dat muddy ribber, an' you jist sabe my life and give me some money to git dry clothes with, and I remembers it."

"Well, it would have been better had I allowed you to drown, old woman, than to go to the bad and herd with outlaws."

"Tain't so, chile, 'tain't so, for I was a-herdin' den wid outlaw pirls, an' my ole massa's lugger were lyin' out in de stream den, an' I was going ashore to market, when I got upsetted; but I must be going now, young massa, and I wants you to recommemmer dat I is your friend."

With this the old outlawed negress took up her lantern and dishes and departed, while Irving muttered:

"My friend, yes; but what good now, here in this place, can the friendship of that poor old negress do me?"

"Alas, none!"

Yet it was pleasant to feel that there was one on board the vessel who was his friend, and his thoughts turned then to the smuggler lieutenant and he mused aloud:

"Granger seemed to look kindly at me; but how he has fallen."

"Only to think that a short time ago Barton Keys and Chester Granger were the greatly admired beaux at the Blue Anchor Inn."

"Now Barton Keys is to die as a pirate, and Chester Granger is a smuggler, and I, I will doubtless be killed by the Smuggler Queen."

In her next visit to the prisoner the old negress was less communicative, and Irving could hardly get her to speak to him; but one afternoon she came in earlier than usual with his supper and said:

"Young massa, I is going to let you go soon arter dark."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked the midshipman, with intense surprise.

"Well, chile, de lugger am a-runnin' close to a island, and—"

"What island?"

"I dunno, sah, but it am a very good-size island, an' Missy Rita hab say that you swim like a fish, and I intend to set you free, sah, git off dem irons, and you kin go quiet through de cabing, get out of de stern port, which am very large, and drop down inter de water, while de lugger am goin' along, so nobody know not'ing about it."

"But you will get into trouble, my good woman."

"No, sah, for I 'buses you terrible when I talks ag'in' yer, an' dey won't neber suspect me, an' if Missy Rita do 'spect some ob de mens and kills 'em, dey will be preci's little loss, massa."

This statement the youth could not contradict, so he said:

"Well, my good old auntie, I'll take the chances of the swim if you will set me free, and here is some gold for you."

"No, sah, I don't touches your money, fer you done pay me already in sabin' my life."

"No, sah, I has feelin'," and the old negress walked off; but it was not long before she came running in greatly excited, and bearing in her hands a couple of pistols, while she cried:

"Quick, massa, quick! for dere am a better way ter sabe yerself, sah, as dere am trouble on deck."

"Heur am de weepins, and I follers yer wid more, fer I doesn't use 'em myself."

"I hain't got no key now, but I guesses we kin git dis chain loose."

With this she thrust a piece of iron, which

she had brought in with her, through the ring to which the chains were attached, and uniting their strength they broke it.

"Now, massa, go fer God's sake and sabe Missy Rita," cried the old outlaw negress, thrusting a pistol into each manacled hand, and then gathering up several other weapons which she had brought with her.

"Quick, sah, dis way, and I follers yer wid dese weapons."

What had happened Irving could not know; but he certainly could not get himself into any worse trouble, so he seized the pistols and hastily left the hold.

For a moment the light dazzled him, but clambering up to the deck, he suddenly came upon a scene which the reader has already witnessed, for it is the attack upon the Lady Captain and her lieutenant by the crew of the lugger.

Springing forward, his chains dangling about him, his dark hair waving in the wind, for he wore no cap, a pistol grasped in either hand, and the old negress, bearing a cutlass and several other weapons, close upon his heels, the Planter Midshipman shouted, in a voice that was stern and threatening:

"Avast there, mutineer hounds, and hunt your kennels, or I fire!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SACRIFICE.

HAD a thunderbolt burst from a perfectly clear sky, it could not have startled the crew of the lugger, and the Smuggler Queen and Granger, more than did the appearance upon the deck of Irving Brandt, the young Planter Midshipman, in his irons, with the old outlaw negress following him closely as a "walking arsenal."

The youth was in irons, it was true, but still he was dangerous, for he held a pistol in either hand, and he looked the one to use them, while the old negress certainly was a dangerous reserve force, with her cutlass and armful of fire-arms.

At the ringing words of the youth, the actors in the scene on the lugger's stern became, as it were, transfixed, and every one paused, forming a striking tableau for an instant as they gazed upon the midshipman advancing upon them.

The mutineer ringleader involuntarily then released his grasp upon the Smuggler Queen, for he saw that one of the pistols covered his heart, while the other seemed to be aimed at every one of his comrades, and Chester Granger found himself again free.

So for an instant rested the scene, and again came the words:

"To your kennels, hounds; the man that hesitates I kill!"

"Say, young clipper, I'll not move one step for—"

The crack of the pistol checked the ringleader's words, and he fell dead at the feet of the Smuggler Queen.

"Will you go now?" and the voice of the midshipman rung like a bugle, and seizing the cutlass from the outlaw negress, and still holding the other pistol, he began to advance, when, with an alacrity that showed their spirit broken, the smugglers rushed forward, keeping close against the other bulwark, to avoid getting nearer than possible to the one who had so promptly carried out his threat.

Then advancing, Irving Brandt stood before the Smuggler Queen, who eyed him with a look that showed the intensest hatred.

But Chester Granger spoke up quickly, and said earnestly:

"Irving, we owe you our lives, and I feel that the Lady Captain will now permit you to go free."

"Never!" and the word was uttered almost with ferocity.

Chester Granger turned upon the woman with surprise, and said reproachfully:

"Surely you will not consider him a prisoner after this, Lady Rita?"

"Yes, a hundred times yes, for he has saved my life before, and when he does so, it only serves to make me hate him the more."

"Missy Rita, I hopes you'll let him go, for he awful good young man, an' he do heaps o' good for you jist now," said the negress, coming forward, and still holding the weapons, as she stopped by the side of the youth.

"You do not ask for your life, sir?"

cried Rita, turning her burning eyes upon Irving.

"I do not humble myself to ask for what I know I will not receive," was the haughty reply.

"Ah! you know me, it seems, and it is well you have no hope, for I will be merciless; but yet I would like to hear you beg me for your life."

"You will be disappointed, for that I will not do; but, did I so please, I have the power here to force you to terms," and he glanced significantly at the weapons.

The Smuggler Queen started uneasily, for she saw the truth of his words; but she said, in a voice that was hoarse with passion:

"Use your power, and see if my iron will does not match your own, boy."

"I have no desire to turn a weapon against a woman's heart, and I surrender myself again, trusting to you."

He held out the cutlass and pistol as he spoke, and Rita said sternly:

"Granger, disarm him, for he is dangerous, as we have just seen, even with his irons on."

With a sigh the smuggler lieutenant stepped forward and took the weapons, while he remarked:

"Lady Captain, the crew may not yet be thoroughly tamed, so it would be well to free Master Brandt and allow him to remain in the cabin."

It was now too dark for the men forward to be distinctly seen, but they were grouped together, evidently discussing what had occurred, and the fate of their ringleader, who still lay upon the deck where he had fallen.

But the Smuggler Queen was incorrigible in her hatred, and answered:

"No, he shall not again have a chance to aid me in any way, for we must part now and forever."

The lugger had swept up into the wind, when the mutineers had seized the Smuggler Queen and her lieutenant, and now lay to, rising and falling with the swell.

The island was just visible from the deck, and upon it the eyes of the Smuggler Queen were turned.

Realizing her intention, Granger said earnestly:

"You surely do not intend to carry out your former intention, Lady Captain?"

"I do."

"But, Lady—"

"Silence, senor!"

He obeyed; and turning to the midshipman the revengeful woman continued:

"Senor Midshipman, do you recognize that island?"

"I do not know our locality, lady, and it is too dark to recognize its outline, if I have seen it before."

"It is the Haunted Island."

"Ah!"

It was all that he said, and if she expected to see him start with fear she was disappointed.

"I mean the Witches' Isle!"

"Yes, lady, I know it now."

"It is the spot we fled from."

"True, and it is well that we did."

"Ah! I am glad to hear you speak thus; but now let me tell you, that you will have an opportunity of solving the mystery of the Witches' Island."

"I, lady?"

"Yes; here, Granger, take these keys and unlock his irons."

"Ah, Lady Captain, it is kind of you," said Granger, misunderstanding her motive.

"No, for if he went overboard he would drown with his irons on, while free of them he can swim, and I wish him to live and suffer yonder rather than sink here in the depths."

With a sigh Granger unlocked the manacles, and Irving Brandt stood up no longer weighted down with chains.

But the Smuggler Queen had taken the precaution to make the negress stand behind her with the arms, and thus keep them out of reach of the prisoner.

"Ho, men!" called out Rita, in a voice that she could throw from one end of the ship to the other, even in a storm, notwithstanding that her tones were soft and flute-like in conversation.

The men started at the stern hail.

What was to follow they knew not.

Had their Lady Captain determined to punish them?

With night, the vicinity of the Witches' Island, their ringleader lying dead aft, and their utter failure in the mutiny, they were cowed.

With all their superstitious ideas too, of the Witches' Isle, they yet had formed a plan to benefit themselves by the jewels which they knew Rita had with her, and their leading spirit had, by sacrificing her and the lieutenant, intended to wipe out the robbery of the victims by their death.

It was therefore the second time that the Smuggler Queen hailed before she got answer.

"Forward there! I called you, men!"

"Ay, ay, lady," they now sung out in chorus, and in a body they walked aft.

"Halt there!" and she indicated a spot some fifteen paces distant from where she stood.

They obeyed in silence.

"Men, you wanted two lives as a sacrifice to save this lugger from some awful doom which would come upon it?"

"Well, at my feet lies your ringleader, and he shall serve as one."

"There stands the second!" and she pointed to the midshipman.

Not a word broke the silence that followed her words, and after a moment she continued:

"Men, throw that youth into the sea, and then get to your posts, for the lugger must fly swiftly away from here and leave him to his fate."

Resistance on the part of Irving was useless, and he knew it; but he would not allow the advancing men to lay hands upon him, and sprung lightly over the bulwark into the sea, while, as he rose to the surface, rung in his ears the mocking laughter of the Smuggler Queen, and her words:

"Now, boy, I have avenged my poor father."

With the last words she uttered, a loud cry broke from her lips, followed by a chorus of voices in tones of horror while Chester Granger shouted:

"In God's name, what is that?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE SKELETON HELMSMAN.

THE cause of the sudden outcry of those on board of the smuggler, was at what they had suddenly discovered coming straight toward their craft, and appearing in the darkness with a vividness that revealed that which sent a chill of horror to the heart of every one who saw it.

"For God's sake! get the lugger under way!" cried the Smuggler Queen, her voice quivering with terror, and, with trembling hands, chattering teeth, and livid faces, the crew obeyed, the sails filled, and the craft began to forge ahead, while every one on board stood gazing at the object that had so startled them, and still held them fascinated by the awful sight from which they seemed unable to raise their eyes.

And what was it that they beheld?

A sight that would unnerve the stoutest heart, a sight that would have put to flight the bold skeptic of the supernatural in those days of superstition.

There, a few cable-lengths distant, was a boat coming in the wake of the lugger, and when first sighted had been heading directly for the smuggler.

It was a boat, yet not a boat, for it was simply a *huge coffin*.

In this strange hull was a mast, to which was attached a red leg-of-mutton sail, with a large white skull and cross-bones in the center.

But the one who sailed this weird craft, I hear my reader ask?

Ah! there was the greater terror to the crew of the lugger, for the one who sailed this remarkable boat was a *skeleton*.

There he sat in the stern, one bony hand upon the tiller, the other holding the sheet rope, and guiding his boat straight in the wake of the lugger.

And all this was distinctly visible from the glare of a green light, as spectral as a will-o'-the-wisp, that shone down from the mast-head, shedding a weird halo over all beneath it, and bringing out the coffin-boat and skeleton helmsman in bold relief.

Was it a wonder then that the smuggler crew did all in their power to urge their lugger away?

Was the skeleton helmsman in chase?

Was this strange craft a warning to them of their doom?

None of these questions could the smugglers answer.

All they wished was to drop it out of sight as soon as possible.

"Where is the boy?" suddenly asked the Smuggler Queen, and her voice was hoarse and quivering as she put the question to Chester Granger.

In their horror at the little death-craft in their wake, all had forgotten the midshipman.

Now all eyes turned over the waters in anxious search of him.

He, too, had seen the death-craft, but what had been the effect on him?

Had the sight unnerved him, and had he sunk beneath the waters?

Anxiously all eyes turned toward where he had last been seen as he struck boldly out from the lugger when he sprung overboard.

Now this weird craft was about in that very spot.

The greenish halo it cast from the lantern, or light, on the mast-head fell in a circle about it, illumining only a short distance around.

Elsewhere the waters were too dark for the swimmer to be seen.

But suddenly a cry came from Rita's lips.

"See! see! the boy! the boy!"

Then in the arc of greenish light now appeared a dark object upon the waters.

All upon the deck of the lugger saw it, and there was no doubt, for a chorus of voices cried, and yet in hushed tones:

"Yes, it is the boy."

With strong stroke he was swimming, with no sign of nervousness, and his course lay directly toward the bows of the coffin-boat.

Dazed by the sight, those on the lugger stood in horror, their eyes fascinated by the spectacle.

On glided the lugger, her tattered sails drawing full, and sending her at a brisk pace through the waters.

On came the spectral craft, seeming to gain as she came on, dancing over the waves, the halo from the mast-head making the crests look like showers of emeralds, and her skeleton helmsman still holding on his way, his little crimson sail, with its hideous emblems on it, drawing well, and a curl of green foam under his blunt bows.

But the brave young swimmer?

He was still directly in the course of the ghastly craft, and still swimming boldly directly for it.

Was it a fascination that drew him there, a power he could not shake off?

Was he, reckless as he was known to be, daring enough to attempt to hail that skeleton helmsman?

It could not be that he was thus defiant alone in the sea, and with such a sight before his eyes.

But from the moment he had appeared within the circle of light, he had been seen to be steadily swimming toward the very bows of the coffin:

Not with a struggling, uncertain stroke was he going; not as one who was drowning, or as one who was in mortal fear; but, on the contrary, as fearlessly, it seemed, as though he sought to catch the gunwale and draw himself on board as readily as if it were a gig, or a cutter sent to his aid from a vessel-of-war.

Breathless, all stood the ripple of the waves under the lugger's bow, mingling with the murmuring waters in her wake, alone breaking the stillness of the night.

All eyes were riveted upon that arc of greenish light.

None spoke, for no one dared to.

No one moved, other than the hand of Chester Granger upon the helm, and that movement was mechanical, as the "feel" of the rudder caused him to port or starboard the tiller.

Thus a moment of mortal anguish to all, and then the bows of the coffin passed over the young swimmer and instantly all was darkness, for the spectral craft disappeared as suddenly as it had come into view.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PLANTER AND THE MONEY-LENDER.

DON RUDOLPHO, the money-lender, was pacing to and fro in his private office, a smile upon his lips, and a strange light glimmering in his eyes.

He was just then in a good humor with the world in general, for all had gone well with him, though with those whom he called "friends" all had gone wrong.

One of those so-named friends, Restel, the Sea Owl, had been slain, and his daughter, the beautiful Lady Captain, was then absent, trying to arrange some plan to avenge her father, and also to rescue her husband, the Sea Ghoul Pirate, who then lay in prison awaiting his doom.

From Rudolpho's office Barton Keys, the Ghoul of the Sea, had gone forth with great expectations of certain revengeful schemes he intended carrying out, and a few hours after he had been recognized as the famous sea outlaw, in spite of his disguise as Monsieur Enrique Erricson, a French merchant of wealth.

Of course Don Rudolpho regretted the circumstances, for in the pirate chief he had a richly-paying patron, and he was more than willing to aid the pirate in effecting his escape.

But, should Barton Keys die on the gallows, then Rudolpho knew he held certain jewels in keep for him to which he would doubtless fall heir, although he had given a receipt for them.

"Well, I will call upon the captain and have a talk with him to cheer him up, telling him that that sweet wife of his is doing all she can, with my aid, to rescue him," muttered Rudolpho, and putting on his hat, he was going out of the shop when a visitor entered.

"Well, sir, how can I serve you?" asked Rudolpho politely, regarding the visitor, who was a distinguished-looking gentleman, with a soldierly air, yet with a certain embarrassment of manner just then, as though he did not like the surroundings of the place to which he had come.

"I desire to see you a moment on business, please," was the response.

Don Rudolpho was a man who lived with the keen knife of the law suspended above him; but he was yet one who covered his tracks well, and he held so many great people in his power, through loans due him, that he was in a measure defiant.

But when a stranger wished to see him, Don Rudolpho took him to an inner office, first speaking a word to an attendant.

Once in that office, a stranger was wholly in the power of the money-lending Don, for he was under the muzzle of a revolver held in the hands of one whom he could not see, or whose presence he did not suspect.

"Now, sir, be seated, and say how I can serve you."

"I need some money, senor."

"This is the place to get it, sir."

"I need quite a large sum."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"On what security?"

"My autograph."

"Ah! you are—"

"Colonel Rupert Brandt, sir," said the visitor, and with the air of one who felt that his name was good for the amount.

"I know you, sir, and your autograph is good enough for my acceptance; but may I ask why you do not go to your bankers?"

"Simply because this is an outside loan that I do not care to have known," said Colonel Brandt, with some nervousness.

"All right, Colonel Brandt, it is none of my business; but I will let you have the money, sir."

"When do you want it?"

"Now."

"Please make out your paper, sir," and Rudolpho shoved pen, ink and paper before the borrower.

"I wish it for one month, sir."

"All right, sir, make the note out for twelve thousand dollars, payable one month hence."

"Ten thousand was the sum."

"True, but the interest is two thousand."

"This is usury, Senor Rudolpho," angrily said the colonel.

"It may be; but if you do not care to pay my price, go elsewhere, Colonel Brandt."

"I am forced to pay it, sir."
 "Then there is the money, so be good enough to make out the note."
 This the colonel did, and then he counted the money and found it correct.

"You made quite a capture at your home the other day, Colonel Brandt, when you discovered in your guest, Merriman Enrique Erricson, none other than Barton Keys, the Sea Ghoul," said Rudolpho, and there was a sneer in his tone.

"Yes, and the fellow deceived the entire town most cleverly; but his life of crime will end now, for within the month he dies."

"He deserves it, sir, if only for the manner in which he has deceived you and persecuted your daughter, and the poor tutor, Mr. Carr," and Rudolpho seemed to take pleasure in giving the colonel hits.

"My daughter, sir, we will not discuss," he said, haughtily, and he turned to go, when Rudolpho continued:

"You have a fine son, colonel, in Master Irving, and one who will make his mark in the world."

"Yes, he is a fine boy, and has been made a midshipman of late."

"Will he give up planting?"

"Oh, no, for his duties will keep him on the coast, and he can be often at home; but I am a little anxious about him now, as he sailed for Mobile some time ago, and the vessel has not been seen by any incoming craft, and she was caught in a fearful storm, if you remember."

"The Sea Vulture you refer to?"

"Yes."

"I know that there is anxiety felt regarding her, for I had a friend sail in her."

"Indeed! and they say that she sailed with a light load and small crew; but then Irving is a splendid sailor, and could lend his aid if need be, and I hope she will turn up all right."

"I hope so, colonel," and the money-lender bowed the planter out, while he muttered:

"It is strange that this vessel has not been heard from."

"I hope she will turn up all right, for it would be fearful to lose the sweet Rita at this stage of the game."

"But now to see the captain," and Don Rudolpho went on his way to the city prison.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PIRATE'S BEQUEST.

In a cell in the city prison, a perfect vault in strength and appearance, sat the pirate prisoner, Barton Keys.

Only a year before he had been a young man destined as all believed to make a name of honor for himself, though he was known to be a "little wild."

The son of an aristocratic and wealthy family, he even then wore the mask of honor, and served Satan well beneath it.

A man of refinement, accomplishments and distinguished appearance, he had allowed his love of gold to drag him down to ruin, while his nature, vindictive in the extreme, had caused him to turn with revengeful hand against all who stood in his way.

Thus he had slain one successful rival for the hand of Maud Brandt, and had nearly hanged another lover, Bradford Carr, for the murder, while he had driven to ruin, despair, and then piracy, Chester Granger, a third admirer of the beautiful heiress.

But, in the seeming moment of triumph, when he held Colonel Brandt in his power through gambling debts, Chester Granger had been captured by Bradford Carr, forced to confess, and Barton Keys, the murderer, had been put under sentence of death.

But not to die then, for, escaping, he had been saved from drowning by Rita, the Smuggler King's daughter, and through her father had become the commander of the pirate schooner, Sea Ghoul, in which he had again almost successfully sacrificed Bradford Carr, and dragged poor Maud down to a life of wretchedness.

His vessel run down, and himself tracked through all his villainy, and captured, he had now the bitter thoughts of his sinful past alone to brood over, as he sat, ironed to the floor, in that grave-like cell.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," said the jailer, and in walked Don Rudolpho, as the heavy iron door swung open.

"I wish to see the prisoner alone, Jackson."

"Don, I cannot allow it."

"Oh, yes, for it is a little story of love I wish to talk with him about."

"Here, figure up what this makes by yonder window," and the Don handed the jailer a generous number of coins.

The jailer locked the door and retreated to the window, which was only twenty paces away, to count over the sum he had received.

"Well, captain, these are not pleasant quarters?" and the money-lender shuddered as he glanced around the dismal cell.

"No, but they are in keeping with my thoughts," was the moody response of the pirate.

"You must not get blue, for you are not dead yet."

"True, but nothing will buy these men to let me off."

"Well, you have one working for you that you may depend upon."

"You?"

"No, your little wife, whom you have slighted so, to try and win that heiress, Miss Brandt."

"By Heaven! once I am free and I will yet do so," said the pirate, savagely.

Then he asked:

"Where is Rita?"

"She sailed for Mobile two weeks or more, ago, to get the little lugger and her crew in readiness to act, for it had gone there to fit out, and I am doing what I can at this end."

"When will she return?"

"She should have returned ere this, and frankly, some anxiety is felt regarding the safety of the ship in which she sailed."

"You see, she carried a rich cargo, and I put some men on board of her to take possession of her, and what the result is I do not know; but I guess she is all right, for the captain and two or three men were the only ones to overcome, though I now learn that young Brandt sailed in her as a passenger."

"Indeed! And my wife there?"

"Yes; but his going was not known to me until to-day."

"He is a bad one to overcome, Rudolpho, and I hope you sent men enough."

"I hardly think that I did, for I did not look for his going, and expected the two or three men belonging to the vessel, to be bought over, and the captain to be the only one to kill."

"And has she not been heard from?"

"No; but there was a very severe storm some days after her departure, and that may have blown her off into the Gulf."

"I hope it is all right, for I believe that Rita can save me if she tries."

"I will do all I can to aid her; but, by the way, I learn that you are to be taken on board a cruiser, and will be again searched before you go, so if you have any jewels, or papers about you, that you wish kept, give them to me."

"I believe I can trust you, Rudolpho."

"I thought that you knew it, captain."

"Well, I will be forced to do so; but if I am rescued, it must be before I am taken on a cruiser, for once there I leave hope behind."

"That is true, and if the Lady Rita does not turn up to-day I will take the matter in hand— Ah! this is the bag of jewels you wish me to keep?" and the money-lender took from the hand of the pirate a small buckskin pouch.

"Yes."

"And the papers?"

"Here, and among them is your receipt for the jewels I have already left in your hands, so you see that I trust you."

"Yes; but all shall be safe, and when you get free, you have but to ask for them."

"If I die, I shall not need them; but I wish you to give them to—"

"Who?" asked Rudolpho, as the pirate paused.

"Maud Brandt."

"And not the Lady Rita, your wife?"

"No, for I love Maud Brandt so well that I wish to make her my heiress so give all to her."

"If I live, I will seek revenge against her, and all she holds dear; but dead, I make her my heiress, so give to her these papers, and this bag of jewels, unopened, only send them

to her in such a way that she will not suspect from whom they come."

"I will obey you, captain; but now I must leave, for Jackson, the jailer, is getting nervous."

"Good-by, and keep up hope."

With this the Don departed, and soon after sat alone in his office, gazing at the sealed package of papers and the buckskin bag given him by the pirate chief.

Touching a bell, a youth appeared in answer.

"Carlo, I wish you to sit there and open that envelope and little bag."

"Yes, senor," and the boy did as he was directed.

"Be careful with both, for I wish to preserve the wrapper."

"Yes, senor," and the boy slowly untied the strings that held the papers, and then broke the seal.

Next he raised the buckskin bag, and attempted to untie the strings with his teeth, when suddenly his head sunk forward and he fell upon the floor.

"Good God! the boy is dead, and I feel strangely, oh, so strangely—the papers were poisoned."

"Fresh air! fresh air I must have, or die!" and the man bounded toward the door, opened it and tottered out into a little garden into which it led, his hands upraised, his look that of one struck with some sudden, deathlike illness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEADLY INHERITANCE.

THE sudden illness of the money-lender was to him a startling revelation, for it revealed the fact that the pirate chief had laid a deep plot to strike after his death, should he die on the gallows.

Once out of the room in the open air, and Don Rudolpho felt his scattered senses and nerves coming back to him.

He threw the door wide open, leaving the pure outer air to rush into the room, and hastily stepping within raised the window.

In the instant that he was there he felt the same deathly feeling creeping over him as before, but not to such an extent.

He glanced at the youth who had opened the fatal package, and saw that he did not move.

Locking the door communicating with his outer office, he stood out in the little garden gazing at the prostrate form of the boy with a look of horror.

After a while he ran in and took up the package of papers and the little bag and carried them outside.

Then he bound his kerchief tightly over his nostrils and mouth, and began to open them.

From the package arose a cloud of white dust, more like a mist than anything else.

One paper only had writing on it, and this read simply:

"To you my inheritance is death."

"BARTON KEYS."

"Well, it was nearly so, Sir Pirate, and but for my caution in making the boy open the packages, it would have been."

"But I do not see my receipt here," he muttered, as he hastily turned the papers over with a cane.

Then he opened the little buckskin bag and threw its contents on the ground, at the same time dashing it quickly from him.

Enveloped as were his nose and mouth, and out in the open air, he did not feel the effects of the dust arising from the bag, which was a neatly embroidered affair, having several pockets in it.

But there were no jewels therein, only a few little wave-washed stones, while upon a slip of paper was written:

"Pebbles from Witches' Island—my sole inheritance besides my hatred."

"BARTON KEYS."

"Ha! Sir Pirate, this accursed inheritance was meant for me, as well as for the Lady Maud Brandt."

"I see how it is—you trusted me with the package and the bag, knowing that if I proved false you would hear of my death, before the gallows swung you off, and could then concoct some other plan of revenge for her."

"When I expected to get my receipt, given you for the jewels you left in my care, and those gems which I knew you still

to have, I received only your inheritance of death.

"I see; had I delivered the things intact, Lady Maud would have been the victim.

"Trying to steal what I believed to be riches, I was to be the victim.

"So, ho, my pirate captain, I am yet alive, and so is the Lady Maud.

"Now, to see what game I'll play against you; but first let me get rid of that dead boy.

"Ah! he goes to the old attic until I can take him to the river by night, for no one must know his fate."

So saying, he entered the room once more.

The scent of the powder yet remained to a slight extent; but, raising the body quickly in his arms, he bore it by a secret door up a winding stairs.

For some time he was absent, and had just returned, when a knock came upon the door leading to the shop.

Hastily he put away the package and bag in a little box, and opened the door.

"A lady to see you, senor," said the clerk.

"I will see her in my other room, the sanctum, Bono."

"Yes, senor."

"And send Denton to me."

"I thought he was in the room with you, senor."

"No; he is not there."

"He is not in the shop, senor."

"Then look him up, for I want him," and Don Rudolpho passed on to his sanctum, the "curiosity-shop," where he had articles of "iron" of all kinds, and from all nations, and many of them with red histories in their getting, for the Don's largest business was in the booty of the sea rovers.

There he received the lady visitor, who, as Bono had told him, awaited his pleasure.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SMUGGLER QUEEN AND DON RUDOLPHO.

As the lady visitor swept into the room, the money-lender recognized her at once.

"The Lady Rita!"

"Yes; I am back again, senor."

"And most delighted am I to see you, lady."

"But what success?" said Don Rudolpho, eagerly.

The Sea Owl lies out in the lake, disguised as a coaster."

"And is ready for action?"

"Yes."

"And why the delay in the Vulture's reaching port, lady?"

"The Vulture will never reach port, senor."

"Ha! what do you mean?" cried the Don, excitedly, and it was no common thing for him to be ruffled out of his usual calm demeanor.

"She was wrecked in a severe storm."

"Wrecked! and where?"

"On Witches' Island."

"On that accursed island? But what was she doing off her course?"

"We had trouble on board, senor, for the young man you sent in charge of the crew, to start the mutiny and seize the ship, did his work but too well for his own interest."

"I do not understand you, lady."

"You wished all of the crew who would do so to desert at the last moment?"

"I did."

"And you had some of your own men near to enlist in the place of those who did desert?"

"I did."

"And over them you placed your young clerk?"

"I did nothing of the kind, lady, for I placed an old seaman in charge; but your words open my eyes to a mysterious disappearance, that of Perdido, my confidential clerk."

"Yes, he was the one, and the old seaman you speak of was doubtless the man we lost overboard before we got out of the river."

"Perdido then was the devil who deserted me to further his own ends; but I listen with pleasure to your story, lady."

"Well, senor, it is soon told; but I believed that Perdido was the man you placed in charge, and he was the one who got rid so

promptly of the one you did put over your crew.

"He also sought to kill me, for the jewels he knew that I carried with me, and he led the mutiny; but there was a passenger on board who barred his way."

"By Heaven! that midshipman."

"Irving Brandt?"

"Yes."

"He it was. And you knew that he was going?"

"No, lady, I knew that he went from his father's lips; but tell me of him."

"Well, Senor Don, your traitor clerk chased me to the yard-arm in a storm, and rather than that he should have triumphed, I would have sprung into the sea; but just then the Planter Middy, who had pretended illness and kept his state-room, appeared from below and brought matters to a different termination.

"But I will not tire you by the whole story; but simply tell you that I sprung into the sea, the ship struck, and all went overboard except the midshipman, who had the good sense to run into the cabin and thus escape the wave that washed the decks.

"Coming upon deck immediately after he saw me off on the waves, for the lightning made the sea as bright as day, and attaching a rope to himself and the ship, he sprung overboard and saved me, and I assure you against my will."

"He is a wonderful fellow, Lady Rita."

"His wonderful career is ended now, Don Rudolpho."

"What, is he dead?"

Unheeding the question, the Smuggler Queen continued:

"I was saved, as I said, and together we built a raft, and went on it to the island, where again he saved my life.

"Worn out, I sunk down to rest in a ravine, while he went off to investigate a strange, green light we had seen upon the island.

"How long he was gone I know not; but he came back on a run, aroused me, and my ears were filled with unearthly shrieks, the baying of hounds, and cries of night birds.

"We fled along the shore, found a boat, and put out to sea.

"The next day my own lugger picked me up, and I put the boy in irons, and sailed for my father's old retreat."

"After he had saved you, lady?"

"Why not? Because he had saved me should I forget that he had killed my father?"

"Oh, no! I did not forget it, and I had my revenge, though he again saved me, for on my way here I ran toward the Witches' Island—"

"It is said that a vessel thus steering is doomed, lady."

"Yes, so the crew said, and mutinied, and they would have killed both my lieutenant—"

"Argyle?"

"Yes, only his name is not Argyle."

"Not Argyle, lady?"

"No, it is Chester Granger!"

"What, that wild young planter whom Barton Keys lured to ruin?"

"Yes."

"I felt that I had seen him before; but pray go on with your story."

"I would have been sacrificed with Granger, had not the midshipman, freed by my old negress, come on deck armed, and driven the mutineers off."

"Then I got my revenge, for I ordered him thrown into the sea, so that he would only have the Witches' Isle to swim to for safety, and his going there meant some horrible death."

"After he had again saved you, you did this?" reproachfully said the money-lender.

"I say, yes; but he sprung into the sea himself, and then we all saw a sight which the Holy Virgin deliver me from beholding again!"

"What was it, lady?"

"A small boat, the hull a coffin, a lantern on the mast, a crimson sail, with skull and cross-bones upon it, and the helmsman a skeleton!"

"Great God! You saw this?"

"I did."

"I have heard of this coffin-craft being seen before, but set it down as a sailors' yarn."

"It is no sailors' yarn, but true; for I saw

it, and fled from it, while the Planter Middy boldly swam to it.

"We saw its bows strike him, and then no more, for the lantern at its mast-head went out and all disappeared.

"As soon as we could collect our wits, we set sail for the lake-shore, and here I am."

"Lady, you astound me with what you say; but though I deeply deplore the loss of the Vulture's booty, I rejoice at the fate of the traitor, Perdido, and at your safe return."

"And what of my husband?"

"He is in prison, but goes on board a vessel-of-war soon."

"Then we must act at once," was the stern response of the Smuggler Queen.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE SPIDER'S WEB.

WITH Colonel Rupert Brandt gambling was a passion that took such a strong hold upon him that he could not throw off the craving, or resist any great temptation to a game of chance.

Well he knew that he had been a loser from his youth, and a heavy loser; but he would still treasure up the thought that the tide must turn in his favor and he yet win heavily.

His pledges to his dead wife, his vows to his children, had all been given in good faith; but when he was tempted he forgot all his severe lessons, cast the remembrance of his pledges aside, and yielded.

So it had been a few evenings before when an irresistible impulse made him enter the Palace of Chance, that fashionable gambling-hell that had lured many a man to ruin, and whose gilded walls had echoed with many a pistol-shot which had ushered a despairing life into eternity.

He had an idea that his luck would change, for all had worked well of late for those of his name, as Maud's lover, Bradford Carr, had returned, no longer stamped with the name of pirate, which his mysterious and suspicious departure had put upon him.

Then his son, Irving, had captured the Smugglers of the Rigoletts, and had received a midshipman's rank in the navy, while his old foe, Barton Keys, the Sea Ghoul, had been taken and then lay in prison.

Certainly, with all these happenings for good about him, luck would not desert him, argued the colonel.

He needed money too for some purpose, and not wishing to ask his daughter for it, decided at last to try his chances.

But luck was not on his side, as he found out after a few hours' play, for he not only lost the thousand he entered the Palace of Chance with, but left the place eight thousand dollars in debt to the keeper, who believed him, as others did, a man of vast wealth.

This loss had carried him to Rudolpho, the money-lender, who, also believing him a rich planter, loaned him the ten thousand, as the reader has seen.

With this sum Colonel Brandt again sought the Palace of Chance at the first opportunity, and paying the keeper his debt, was about turning away when he was asked:

"Won't you play to-night, colonel?"

"No, thank you—I do not feel just in the humor."

"Perhaps you would be willing to oblige me, sir, with a little game, though I am unacquainted with you?"

Colonel Brandt turned upon the speaker, and saw before him a mere youth, dressed in an undress naval uniform, and with a bright, handsome face.

At any other time he would have thought it an impertinence for the youth to seek him out as a partner; but now visions of that note to the money-lender rose up before him, and certainly the young sailor looked as though he had plenty to lose, for a diamond of great value glittered in his black scarf, another, its equal, was upon his little finger, and the seal of his fob-chain was encircled by a small fortune in precious stones.

Few people were in the *salon*, and believing that fortune might favor him, the colonel yielded, and answered:

"I will play you, sir, if you so will, and also do me the favor to carry our bets in mind, and not put up money on the table, as

I would not wish my friends to think, with my vast experience, I was taking advantage of one so young."

The colonel spoke patronizingly, and with a certain pomposity of manner that might have given offense to one with a less genial nature than the young sailor seemed to possess.

But he said in reply:

"As you please, sir; shall we take yonder table?" and he pointed to one half-hidden in an alcove.

"Yes, that will do. I will get the cards."

The young sailor walked toward the table, and the planter gambler soon joined him there with a fresh pack of cards.

"Name your sum, sir," said the sailor.

"Any amount you are pleased to state will suit me," answered the colonel.

"One thousand to begin with, then, sir," was the cool remark of the young man, and the colonel felt sure that he had met one who had money, and the next thing to find out was if he had luck.

To his utmost consternation Colonel Brandt found that the young sailor was born under a lucky star, for he won from the first, and so led the planter on that, after a few hours' play, he wrote his due-bill for fifty thousand dollars, and with a groan handed it over to his youthful adversary.

"When will this be paid, Colonel Brandt?" asked the sailor.

"It is a due-bill, sir, with no special time."

"So I see that you have written it; but it is payable, thus written, on demand."

"You surely do not ask it to-night?" gasped the unhappy man.

"No, not to-night; but to-morrow."

"To-morrow! that is a short time to raise such a sum in, young sir."

"Colonel Brandt, let me tell you how you can pay that note."

"Well, sir?"

"I am aware that you have no money of your own, though the world thinks you very rich."

"This note I shall use against you to-morrow, unless you pay it in the way that I demand."

"And what do you demand?" asked the colonel, in a quivering voice.

"You have influence with the prison officials?"

"Yes."

"If you asked to see a prisoner, to have him sent to your house, under an escort, that you might ascertain certain facts from him, of an important nature, connected with certain matters that concerned you and your family alone, would not the officials send that prisoner to you?"

"My dear sir, I am at a loss to understand your drift."

"I simply ask the question, if you made a particular request, to interview a prisoner at your own house, before your lawyer, and your family, would not the jailer let him go there?"

"Yes, under a strong escort, I suppose he would."

"If he should refuse, could you not get an order from the navy commandant, ordering him to do as you wished?"

"I could; but, young man, what does all this mean?"

"In plain words, sir, it means that you are in my power, and I intend to use you."

"Great God! what is your intention?"

"You have put your name here to paper, when you cannot pay it, and you also gave your note to a money-lender for twelve thousand dollars, when you have not as many hundreds to pay it with."

"That note I bought from him, and—"

"Great God! do you seek my ruin?" groaned the planter, now livid with dread.

"Yes, unless you do as I demand," was the stern reply, and all the brightness had gone out of the young sailor's face, leaving it pale and stern.

CHAPTER XXI.

DRIVEN TO CRIME.

"WHAT have you against me?" almost gasped the planter, as he raised his head and bent his bloodshot eyes upon the young sailor.

The young man smiled, a strange, threatening, sinister smile, and the colonel trembled.

He felt that he was in the power of one who was merciless, though it seemed as if hardly eighteen years had passed over the sailor gambler's head.

Before the poor man then arose his pledges to the dead and to the living.

He remembered how his insatiable love of gambling had made him drink to the dregs again and again the bitter cup of despair.

Now he had again fallen, and must again suffer.

The money he had borrowed from Rudolpho had been a thorn in his side, but this youth before him had the evidence of it in his possession, and his due-bill, on demand, for fifty thousand more.

To save his life, personally, he could not raise as many hundreds out of everything he was worth.

He had sinned in the past to save himself, and his sins had escaped detection from the eyes of those he loved.

Must he again sin to save himself?

Then before his eyes flashed an idea of how it might be done.

If the youth was killed he might get back his notes.

His teeth set hard together at this thought, and, unused to hiding his feelings, his face must have shown his desperation, for the young sailor said:

"No threats against me, Colonel Brandt, can save you, for you must do as I demand!"

"Well, come with me to my house, and we will talk it over," said the planter, hoarsely.

"Oh, no! your way home leads along a dark road, where accidents are liable to happen to the unsuspecting."

"What do you mean, sir?" and the colonel's face flushed.

"I mean that I will not trust you."

"Will not trust me?"

"No; you might knife me to save yourself."

"Villain! do you dare—"

"Hold on, Colonel Brandt, and do not get violent, but listen to me."

"You are wholly in my power, and I will ruin you, if you do not do as I tell you."

"What is it you wish of me?"

"I desire to have you get an order from the navy commandant, to allow a prisoner in the jail to visit you at your home."

"Well?"

"Tell the officials you will send your carriage for him, say at eight o'clock to-morrow night, and they can take him there in irons, and three guards can go inside the vehicle with him, and one on the box with your negro coachman, if they wish to send four."

"Well, sir?"

"You order your carriage to go at the appointed hour, while you remain at home, walking up and down your piazza."

"There you will be joined by one who will hand you your two notes—this one of the money-lender, which you see I have here, and the one that you just gave me."

"And this is all that I am to do to get back my notes?"

"Yes."

"But who is this prisoner?"

"He is called the Sea Ghoul," was the cool reply of the young sailor.

Colonel Brandt half sprang from his chair; but the young man said quickly:

"Beware! don't show excitement, or you may attract attention, and it is best that we be not seen together."

"Who are you?"

"That is nothing to you, sir."

"It is everything, now that you ask me to aid you in rescuing that inhuman devil, Barton Keys."

"He may be such to you, sir; but to me he is not, and I do seek his release through you."

"You will never get my aid to so nefarious an act."

"You know best, Colonel Brandt, for if you can stand it, I can."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you aid me, or ruin yourself."

"Those notes would not ruin me, if I made a confession to my daughter of all."

"I think you dare not confess all to her."

"What! by Heaven, I have a mind to instantly betray you as the ally of that accursed pirate."

"Do so, if you wish, and I will betray you."

"What have you to betray, other than I lost money in gambling, and gave my notes for them?"

"Which you have not a dollar to pay with."

"How know you this?"

"I know all your secret affairs, colonel."

"Well, my daughter would make a sacrifice and pay the money, rather than have that sea fiend go free, and the world would not know that it was not my money."

"Your daughter also should know more than that you had broken your pledge to her, and gambled away her inheritance," was the sinister reply of the young sailor.

"What innuendo are you casting out now?" asked the colonel, and he tried hard to be calm.

"Simply, if you find it necessary to protect yourself from releasing the Sea Ghoul, by making a confession of your broken pledge, and thereby robbing your daughter to pay your gambling debts, she shall also know, as shall the world, that her jewel-case, lost some time ago, was stolen by a member of the household, and money-raised on it to save her father from ruin."

Every word uttered fell like a pistol-shot upon the ears of the planter gambler, and told him how thoroughly he was in the power of the young sailor.

For a moment he was silent, not knowing what to do or say; but, as his brow grew clouded, the sailor added:

"All this can be proven, Colonel Brandt."

"What do you want?" gasped the hunted man.

"Merely what I asked you."

"To aid in the rescue of that pirate?"

"Yes."

"That he may again become the scourge of the sea, drive me and mine from our home on the Gulf shores, and live in constant dread of a fate worse than death?"

"No, for he will not again resort to piracy, for he has ample money to live without again sailing under the black flag."

"Money earned by blood," sneered the colonel, and then he winced under the response:

"Yes, blood-money, gold won at the gaming-table, gotten on stolen jewel cases and bogus paper; it is all the same, Colonel Brandt."

"You say that you will return me my notes if I aid you?"

"Yes."

"I will not be known in the matter?"

"Not at all, for you can tell your family you wish to see the pirate, and have asked to have him sent out to your home."

"Make what excuse you please for that."

"Then if he is rescued on the road it is not your fault."

"And he will not again seek revenge on me and mine?"

"No."

"Who are you that answers for him?"

"His wife," was the calm response, and in utter amazement the gambler planter gazed upon the one who uttered the words.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WEIRD RESCUER.

It is time that we now return to the strange sight, witnessed by the Smuggler Queen and those with her upon the deck of her lugger, when it put about and sailed rapidly away from the Witches' Island.

When Irving Brandt, the Planter Midshipman, sprang overboard that night as the smugglers moved toward him to throw him into the sea, it was with the firm determination of swimming to the Haunted Isle, and there see what awaited him, be it ever so terrible.

To remain on the lugger he knew meant certain death, for he had now become convinced that, no matter what he might do for the Smuggler Queen, she would not overlook the fact that he had slain her father, and he would throw his life away to hope for mercy from her.

The old negress had set him free to repay her debt of gratitude due him, but she had not known that the land she saw near, and felt that he could reach by swimming, was the Witches' Island.

Had she so known, she would never have wished him to go there, for her fear of the

supernatural amounted to horror, and she would have sought some other way to save him.

But the mutiny precipitated matters, and once free, Irving had acted for himself.

Then followed the coffin craft with its weird light, seeming to suddenly come from out of the waters, and give chase to the lugger.

When he arose from his dive from the lugger's deck, Irving struck out manfully for the island, and then it was that he, too, beheld the ghastly craft and its skeleton helmsman.

For a moment he seemed dazed, and remained stationary in the water.

The thought was upon him to attempt to regain the lugger.

Then he saw the uselessness of that, and he concluded to swim for the island, giving the death craft a wide berth.

But if it came from the island, such would be the nature of what he would meet there, and he made up his mind to face the worst, and at once.

Death could come to him but once, and any fate was better than this fearful uncertainty.

So with a bold stroke he struck out directly for the skeleton-guided craft.

As he drew rapidly nearer, for it was sailing toward him too, it will be remembered, he took in the entire horror of the sight, from the weird light at the mast-head to the coffin hull.

Then he noticed the red sail, its ghostly emblems, and, last, the skeleton at the helm.

Upon the latter his gaze became riveted whenever the weird boat or himself rose on the top of a wave.

Once or twice he glanced over his shoulder to see the lugger flying rapidly away, those on her decks seeming to stand in spellbound horror, as they appeared to him in the uncertain light.

Again he bent his eyes upon the craft now so near him, and for a moment ceased swimming and riveted his attention upon the helmsman.

Then he hailed:

"Ho, Skeleton Helmsman, ahoy!"

He saw the strange bony form start, glance out over the waters, and let his bows fall off a point or two.

So again he hailed:

"Ho, the floating coffin, ahoy!"

"Ahoy! who hails?" came in a deep, sepulchral voice from the boat.

"A human voice at least; now to see just what I have to meet," muttered the brave boy, and he responded:

"One hails who, in revenge, was thrown from yonder lugger, and seeks aid from you."

A moment of silence, and then, in the same deep tones came the reply:

"Ay, ay, swim to the bows of my boat, and grasp the stern as I go by."

"That sounds real," muttered the midshipman, and then aloud he called out:

"Ay, ay, Captain Death!"

And he did as directed, for as the ghastly craft mounted upon a huge wave he grasped the gunwale aft, and just then the light at the mast-head went out and all was darkness.

But before the young midshipman had an instant to consider the strange situation he found himself in, a strong hand grasped his arm and he was dragged into the ghastly boat, while the one who had thus drawn him out of the sea, and with apparent ease, said, sternly:

"Who are you?"

"A midshipman in the American navy; by name, Irving Brandt," answered the youth, striving to get a look at the strange helmsman by the starlight.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was thrown overboard from yonder lugger."

"Why?"

"It is one of the smuggling fleet of the Sea Owl, whom I killed some time ago, and whose band I broke up, excepting yonder craft and those on board, who are under command of the Lady Captain, as they called the outlaw's daughter."

"She was present at her father's death, and avenged him by throwing me into the sea where the Witches' Isle would be my only chance of succor."

Irving spoke with a frankness of manner

that carried truth with it, and the skeleton helmsman answered:

"You have come to a strange place for life, young man."

"I have come to take my chances and face the worst, be it what it may," was the bold response.

"You are a brave boy, for I noticed how you kept your nerve in the water, when coming toward me."

"I nerved myself to meet the worst."

"And what have you met?"

"A coffin-shaped boat with a red sail, marked with hideous emblems, and a helmsman whom I at first feared was a skeleton."

"And what think you now?"

"I know you to be live flesh and blood, dressed in black, and with the white bones painted upon your body and arms, and a mask representing a skull."

"You have keen eyes."

"I have taken in the situation as it is."

"And what do you think I am?"

"Some dweller upon the island who masquerades to frighten superstitious seamen."

"Why should I?"

"That I do not know; but tell me, was any of the crew of a large vessel, wrecked on this island some nights ago, saved?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I wish to know."

"What do you know of that vessel?"

"I was on her."

"You?"

"Yes; I was a passenger upon her. She was the Vulture, bound from New Orleans to Mobile."

"Yes; so I know."

"And the Smuggler Queen was also on board of her; the crew mutinied, sought to rob the Lady Captain of her jewels, and not watching their course, they ran the vessel on the reef."

"All went overboard, excepting myself, the Lady Captain having previously sprung into the sea, and seeing her, I saved her life."

"And still she sought revenge?"

"Oh, yes; but was any one saved from the vessel?"

"What did you do then?" asked the strange helmsman, as though not hearing the question.

"I built a raft and we came ashore, when I went on a voyage of discovery, was tracked by bloodhounds, and we barely escaped in a boat we found lying in a small cove."

"Boy, you are truthful, and your story accounts for much that I could not fathom."

"Yes; there were several men from the vessel washed ashore."

"And where are they?"

"One of them is on the island."

"And the others?"

"Are here, too, only they are not living."

"Ah! and that one?"

"Is a prisoner."

"Describe him, please."

"A young man, with a dark, handsome face, and he calls himself Perdido."

"Ha! he is the one who led the mutiny, killed the captain, and drove the Smuggler Queen into the sea."

"Well, he is a prisoner now."

"You hold him prisoner, do you?"

"Yes."

"And, as a shipwrecked man, you treat him thus?"

"Yes."

"And I?"

"Will be a prisoner also until the Witch of the Isle decides what shall be your fate."

"The Witch?" and Irving's voice faltered, for the man had been proven so thoroughly human he had hoped that the island held no weird creatures.

"Yes, for this island is owned by Zulah, the Witch, and it was her retreat you ran upon when the hounds gave chase to you."

"Others of your crew were in hiding at that very time, and upon them the bloodhounds sprung and tore them to pieces, all but one, and he is, as I said, a prisoner."

"Now I understand the cause of those wild shrieks. Oh! what a fearful death they met," and Irving shuddered.

"Yes, and all who come to this island meet a fearful death, young man," was the stern response of the strange helmsman, as he ran his boat into a small cove and the bow grated upon the sands.

"Spring ashore, sir, and remember, you are a prisoner."

"Attempt to escape, and the bloodhounds will be set on your track," was the remark of the mysterious boatman, as he lowered his crimson sail.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BLOODHOUND KEEPERS.

If Irving Brandt entertained any idea of escaping from the island, it was quickly dispelled as the man who had rescued him stepped to his side and laying his hand heavily upon his shoulder, said simply:

"Come!"

Glancing earnestly at his captor as he walked along the beach, Irving beheld a man fully seven feet in height, and dressed from head to feet in black, with the white bones that form the human skeleton painted upon his body and limbs, and wearing a mask that enveloped the head, and had the appearance of a skull.

He was also, a man of powerful build, his voice was deep and sonorous, and his movements quick.

He seemed to carry no arms, and if he did, they were concealed somewhere in his tight-fitting suit.

The cove in which the strange craft had landed was in another part of the island from that where the Vulture had been wrecked, and cliffs surrounding it hid from view the mast from any passing vessel.

Following along the sandy beach after a walk of some minutes the captor of Irving turned into a ravine, still keeping his hold upon the shoulder of the youth.

This ravine Irving at once recognized as the one which he had turned into, and so shortly fled out of at his utmost speed.

He knew that the dismal and fearful cave, with its fresco of human bones lay not far ahead.

Suddenly the deep bay of a hound was heard, and instantly others took up the cry until a dozen of the savage brutes were howling in chorus.

"The dogs catch your scent, young man, and woe be unto you if I were not along," said the huge guide.

Then he added:

"Here they come!"

And here they did come, as Irving distinctly saw in the starlight a dozen or more of the savage brutes come rushing down the ravine with the speed of the wind.

"Down! Blood, Bones, Wretch, Death, Fangs!" cried the man, calling the hideous brutes by their equally hideous names as they drew near.

Instantly their career was checked, and they came whining about him, some of them growling about Irving's heels, as though wishing to tear him to atoms, yet making no effort to do so.

"They ate up your shipmates on the Vulture, and think you are another morsel for them," explained the strange man to Irving as they continued on up the ravine.

The midshipman shuddered at the words, for he knew what a fate had been that of the mutineers.

But why had the leader, Perdido, been spared, he wondered, and, more, what was to be his own fate?

It was, therefore, with feelings of deep foreboding that he came in sight of the Death Cavern in the side of the cliff.

Leading him by this, the hounds trotting about his heels, his captor carried him further on up the ravine to where was visible, by the light of a log-fire, several other caverns, smaller, yet fully as revolting in appearance as the larger one.

Into one of these the guide led the youth, and taking up a fagot of pine, lighted it at the fire near, and said:

"I will give you a glance into your quarters."

Irving glanced about him with a shudder, for his cot was made of human bones and pieces of wood from wrecks, and the walls were adorned with hideous emblems of death.

"Here, sir, you will rest, and I will leave you free to move about, but do not step outside of the entrance, for you will be torn to pieces."

"Here, Fang and Terror, you are to guard this gentleman," and he turned to two of the

bloodhounds, who at once lay down in the entrance to the cavern.

"You will find some skins and coverings there, young man, and make yourself comfortable, I beg of you."

With this the strange man left the cavern, and Irving Brandt was alone, excepting his bloodhound keepers, whom the flickering light from the fire in the ravine showed to be on the alert, sleeping with one eye upon him, and seemingly anxious that he should make an effort to escape and thus give them a feast.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WITCH OF THE ISLE.

MORNING broke bleak and cloudy on the Witches' Isle.

After a slumber, deep and refreshing, for he was sadly fatigued, Irving awoke.

Glancing about his cave prison, the look was by no means cheering.

Then his eyes fell upon the bloodhound keepers, who were squatted upon their haunches without the entrance.

His moving about the cave hardly attracted their attention; but when he started toward the entrance they growled savagely in chorus and showed their fangs.

This told the midshipman the utter uselessness of his attempting to escape, and he returned and sat down upon the cot, and took in the different ghastly objects in view.

An hour thus passed, and then a step was heard in the ravine.

The bloodhounds wagged their tails joyously, and presently the strange being of the coffin craft put in an appearance.

He was dressed now in a long black gown, with a white skull and cross-bones upon the heart, and his face was unmasked.

It was a strong face, beardless, full of strength, and yet cunning.

His air and conversation showed that he had been reared in some refinement, and his voice, though deep, was by no means unpleasant.

"I have brought you food, young sir," he said, rather pleasantly, and he set a tray of victuals down before the youth.

There were fish nicely browned, bread and coffee, all of which Irving ate with a relish, throwing the remnant of his breakfast to the dogs, in hopes of gaining their good will.

The man stood by while he ate, and the youth asked:

"What is to be done with me?"

"That, the Witch of the Isle will decide."

"When?"

"To-day, perhaps."

"Where is she?"

"In her cavern."

"And Perdido, the mutineer?"

"He is in a cavern similar to this."

"And have you decided upon his fate yet?"

"I decide nothing; all is in the hands of the Witch."

"What are your duties?"

"Guard and attendant."

"Guard of the island, and attendant on the old Witch?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"An Englishman."

"And you like this life, when you seem so well fitted for one of honor among your fellow-men?"

"No, I do not like the life; but as we have talked together, and you seem interested in me, as I in you, I will tell you frankly that circumstances prevent me from returning to my home."

"I was wrecked on this island, my life was saved, and I sold myself, body and soul, for a certain lapse of time."

"A strange tale and a strange life."

"Yes; but I must say no more," and the man departed, calling off the two hounds, Fang and Terror, and leaving Death and Dismal, two others, in their stead.

"I verily believe he did that because I fed them."

"Well, I'll feed the whole pack if I starve myself," muttered Irving, and he stooped quickly as with a loud shriek a huge owl flapped into the cavern and perched itself upon a skull, blinking at him in wonder.

"Well, I have company, at least, but I do not enjoy the society I am forced to keep," and the midshipman glanced at the owl and then at the hounds.

Pacing his cell to and fro for a long time, he was again visited by the island-keeper.

"Come; the Mother Witch wishes to see you."

Silently and wonderingly the midshipman followed his guide down the ravine, and halted in front of the large cavern before referred to.

There, in the entrance, in a chair made of human bones, sat a woman.

And oh! such a woman. Weird, wild-faced, a mouth seemingly cut out of marble, and her face tattooed with hideous emblems.

Her arms, bare to the shoulder, were also tattooed in the same way, with blue, red and green snakes coiling about them.

She was dressed in red velvet. About her neck, disfigured as her face and arms, were massive necklaces of precious gems, and upon her wrists were bracelets also worth a fortune, while her fingers were each one covered with rings.

Her hair was dyed crimson, and was in strange contrast to her black eyes.

The arms of her chair terminated in skulls, and upon one of these her hand rested, while one foot rested upon a footstool of a like character, it being a pyramid of bones.

In her right hand she held a staff, or wand, it being a long cane painted black.

A black cat sat on one side of her feet, a white one on the other, and upon the back of her chair were perched an owl and a raven, while in her cap was coiled a large rattlesnake.

It was no wonder that Irving started at sight of this marvelous being.

He had never dreamt of the like before, or heard of such in all the stories told of witches by the negroes and the sailors.

"I am the Witch of the Isle, boy; what have you to say for yourself?" she said, in a hard voice, as Irving halted before her.

"I suppose that this man has told you all about me, madam," and the midshipman forced himself to speak with courtesy.

"He has told me that he picked you up at sea last night, and that you had been thrown from a lugger."

"Yes."

"Also that you were wrecked upon this island some time ago, and escaped in one of my boats."

"I did."

"And you see fate brought you back to the Witches' Island for none can escape me."

"Fate would not bring me here again, once I can get away this time," bluntly said the midshipman.

"But it is to get away," she said, with a stern look.

"Yes, that is the idea; but are you open to ransom?"

"Do you see these jewels?"

"I do."

"If you can match their value with gold you can be ransomed."

"What is their value?"

"Half a million."

"Then I guess I remain here."

"It may be not, for you shall have a chance for life."

"What chance is that?"

"You were wrecked on my island, as was also the other."

"I love to destroy, but I dare not destroy you and that other."

"One of you can remain and be my slave, the other must die."

Irving looked as though he thought it would be preferable to die rather than remain as the slave of the old Witch; but he wisely did not say so, and she continued:

"That other shall be brought here, rapiers shall be placed in the hands of you both, and before me you shall fight to the death, and the survivor shall live as my slave."

"Bring the other prisoner here, Bravo," and the Witch turned to the giant guard, who at once departed to obey her bidding.

CHAPTER XXV.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

WHEN the supposed young sailor uttered the two words to Colonel Brandt, that told him just who it was that he had been dealing with, the gambler planter was utterly astounded, and said huskily:

"You say that you are Barton Keys's wife?"

"Yes."

"You are married to him?"

"How else could I be his wife?" was the haughty response.

"I feared, I thought—"

"No, sir; I understand you; but I am not that low, be my crimes of outlawry what they may."

"I was married to Barton Keys upon my father's lugger, by Father Homer, a priest, whom you know well, and I followed his fortunes under the black flag until I was sent with booty to this port."

"Your son captured me, as you also know, and released me, and I went back to my father, who was Captain Restel, the Smuggler King."

"While waiting there to rejoin my husband, who, pirate though he be, I love with my whole heart, Midshipman Brandt attacked my father's vessels in his retreat, and you know the result."

"I was allowed to go by your son, and I now devote my energies and my gold to setting my husband free, and with your aid I can do it readily."

"Without your aid I must seek some other plan."

The woman had spoken in a low, but earnest voice, and every word she uttered Colonel Brandt had distinctly heard and analyzed.

He knew that her plot was a perfect one, by which she could get the pirate chief out of prison.

But what if, once out, he waged war upon him and his family again?

Naturally they would feel revengeful toward his son Irving.

Then, on the other hand, if he did not aid her he knew that she could ruin him.

He was well aware of the fact now that she knew the story of Maud's stolen jewels, and that he had been the one to take them.

With the proof of the money-lender, to whom he had taken them, there would be no doubt of his guilt.

Then again, in spite of his being able to save himself, by confessing all to Maud, outside of the stolen jewels, he did not wish to have her sacrifice the large sum which he had gambled away.

He could then and there expose the woman; but his ruin followed.

If he lent her the aid she asked, no one would dream that he was the one to aid the pirate's escape, knowing that he had more to fear from him than any one else.

All these thoughts passed through the mind of the wretched man as he stood before the disguised woman, she the while calmly waiting for him to speak.

As he kept silent so long she at last said:

"Well, senor, must I seek another plan of rescuing the Sea Ghoul?"

"You ask my aid as you stated?"

"Yes."

"And will give to me the notes of mine which you hold?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"As soon as the Sea Ghoul is safe."

"But the plot may miscarry."

"It cannot."

"Do not be too sure."

"I say it cannot, if you will get the permit, take it to the prison, and state to the keeper that you will send your carriage at night for the prisoner; and four guards, if necessary, can go with him."

"Tell them to keep him in double irons, and send good men, and the vehicle will drive into the jail-yard for them."

"And when will you consider the pirate safe?"

"When he is in the possession of his friends."

"When will that be?"

"The carriage will be halted on the river avenue after leaving the city, and before reaching your home."

"The guards will defend their prisoner with their lives."

"So be it, he will be taken from them."

"Can it not be arranged to avoid bloodshed?"

"What care I for the blood of any man who stands between me and the life of my husband?" said the pretended sailor, sternly.

"Well, I know not what to say."

"Then I shall act, and with the sunrise expose you."

"No, no, do not do that; but tell me when I am to be given my papers?"

"When the chief is free he will be taken

into a boat, and I will send a messenger to you with your notes at once."

"What security have I that you will?"

The woman was silent an instant, and then she took out of her pocket a small bag.

From this she took a score of handsome diamonds.

"Here are just twenty diamonds, and they are worth the value of the paper I hold."

"Keep them together, and return them when your notes are returned to you, which, as I give you security, will be a day or so after the rescue, so that you need have no fear."

The planter took the gems, glanced at them with sparkling eyes, and then said:

"They are indeed security; but I feel that I should have money besides, for I really need gold just now."

The woman smiled contemptuously, but said:

"I will give you now a couple of thousand; but beware that you do not gamble until after you know that the Sea Ghoul has escaped, for, if you lose, and stake those gems, I will ruin you, I swear it."

"Now, do you agree to my terms?"

"I do."

"Then do your duty, Planter Brandt," and the Smuggler Queen strode from the *salon*, leaving the planter gambler alone with his bitter thoughts.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE COLONEL'S PLOT.

COLONEL BRANDT arose, the morning after his interview with the Smuggler Queen, in no good humor, as his negro *valet* diserved with half an eye.

He was cross with himself, and with the world in general, while the few hours of restless sleep he had had did him no good.

Going into the breakfast-room he found there Bradford Carr, the tutor that had been, and now the affianced of Maud, awaiting him.

Bradford Carr greeted him with a pleasant word, but received only a growl in response.

Then Maud came in, looking exquisitely lovely in her morning-robe, and, as was her wont, kissed her father affectionately.

But still he kept up that gloomy manner.

"Father, what has gone wrong with you?" asked Maud, anxiously, fearing that he had broken his pledge, and being tempted, had gambled.

The colonel feared that such was in her thoughts, so he determined to come to the point at once, and said:

"Maud, I am anxious to get hold of some business papers that once belonged to Soule Ravell, your old lover, and who made you his heiress, and this pirate chief—"

"Barton Keys, father?"

"Yes; he alone can give me a clew to them."

"Why not write and ask him about them?"

"I have done so, my child."

"And his answer, father?"

"He said flatly that he will tell you about them, as they concern you, but not me; for he insinuates, as they are marketable property, I might be tempted to dispose of them and gamble them away."

"He is most insulting, sir," said Bradford Carr, calmly.

"Yes, but I consider the source."

"But are they so important, father?"

"Yes, for they involve a matter of some thousands, a speculation which it seems Ravell and Keys entered upon together, and of which no note was made among his papers."

"It is in their names conjointly, and the Sea Ghoul says that he will sign his claim away to you, and tell you how to get the property, but to no one else."

"Then, father, if you think it worth while, I will go to the prison and see the pirate."

"No! no! no! not for the world would I have you go there; my child, nor would Mr. Carr, I am sure, wish it."

"Indeed I would not, sir," answered the tutor.

"Then drop the matter, father, as of little worth," said Maud.

"No, that will not do, for it involves more

than you have an idea; but I will tell you what I will do."

"What, father?"

"It will ask my lawyer to come here to-night, or do you expect company?"

"No, father."

"Then I will have Blackstone come here, and then get a permit from the naval commandant to have the Sea Ghoul brought here."

"Oh, father!"

"Do not get alarmed, my child, for he shall come under a strong guard."

"Still it will be taking a great risk, Colonel Brandt," suggested Bradford Carr.

"No, for I shall send the carriage to the jail, have the pirate doubly ironed, get in with his guards, and drive out here, and no one will be the wiser."

"But will he then make known the secret he holds?"

"Yes, Maud he has said that he will tell you."

"Well, father, you know best; but I did not wish ever to face that wretch inhuman again," and Maud shuddered.

"It will be but for a few moments, my child, and I can think of no better plan, for I will not consent to your going to the prison to see him."

This having been arranged the colonel cheered up, ate a good breakfast, and, accompanied by Maud and Bradford Carr on horseback, rode down to the navy quarters below the city.

The commandant received them cordially, heard the colonel's story, and said he would have the prisoner brought there.

But the colonel urged that he did not wish it known that he was to meet Maud, and begged the commandant to dine with them and meet the pirate there, and hear what he had to say.

This the commandant consented to do, and then he wrote the permit to the prison-keeper, and invited his guests to go on board the pirate schooner and inspect her, she having been put in perfect order as a cruiser.

"What pretty vessel is that?" asked Maud of the commandant, glancing up the river some distance, where a rakish schooner lay at anchor, her sails neatly furled, and all about her looking the trim, fleet cruiser she was.

"That is the craft that also was under sable colors, once upon a time, Miss Brandt, for she belongs to the once noted rover Palafox, the Sea Fox."

"Indeed! I have often seen her before at a distance."

"Yes, most persons wished to see her that way. Miss Brandt, a year ago; but to do the Sea Fox justice, he did much to protect our Gulf coast from other rovers, never warred against or raided upon our own people, or captured vessels bearing our flag, and, in the end turning honest, he became a pirate hunter, and we owe the capture of this very craft to him, for he it was who ran down the schooner, and then its commander, the Sea Ghoul, as you well remember, and the Government pardoned him and his crew, and before long he is to be sent buccaneer-hunting among the Bahamas, I believe."

"Yes, I know," quietly said Maud, while the commandant little dreamed how well she did know all about the Sea Fox, and then had his daughter Myrtle, as her *protegee* at Madame Chotard's boarding-school in the city.

"When does the Sea Fox sail?" asked Bradford Carr, gazing with admiration upon the beautiful vessel.

"As soon as I can spare him the men, for I am using two-thirds of his crew here now; but let us return to my quarters to lunch," and the commandant escorted his guests back to his home, and after a pleasant hour spent around the lunch-table, they took their leave, with the promise of the naval officer that he would dine with them that afternoon, and be on hand to meet the famous Ghoul of the Sea when he should be brought to the mansion to see Maud.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS FRIEND.

WHEN the pretended sailor left the *salon* of the Palace of Chance, it was not as Colonel Brandt had believed and hoped, for good, for, upon reaching the street she

walked rapidly along until she came to a tavern.

This she entered and ascending the stairs of a private door, disappeared in a room.

A short time after a person came out of the room, a cloak about his shoulders, a slouch hat half-concealing his face, the lower part of which was hidden by a long beard.

The man was of middle height, well-dressed, carried a cane, and wore eye-glasses, as could be seen by the swinging lamp in the hallway.

Leaving the inn by the same private entrance by which the disguised Smuggler Queen had entered, the man walked at a quick pace down the street, and at last came to the Palace of Chance.

At the doorway he was halted by a man on duty there, who said politely:

"No admission, monsieur, unless you are known, and I do not recall you, sir."

"Here is my card, monsieur," said the man, speaking in excellent French.

The keeper took the card and read aloud:

"MONSIEUR JAKES BOUDINOT.

"Paris, France."

"Will not that admit me, monsieur?"

"No, monsieur, for our rules are very strict; but if you have a friend in the city who will come with you—"

"No, I have no friends; I am a stranger here; but I love to gamble, and I play large sums, so I came."

"As my card will not admit me, monsieur, will this, and say no more about it?" and the stranger slipped into the hand of the door-keeper several eagles.

"Oh, monsieur! you are generous, and I cannot refuse you," cried the delighted keeper, hardly able to believe his good luck as he gazed at the golden eagles.

"But, monsieur, if you should be questioned, say that you are the friend of Don Rudolpho, for he often sends his acquaintances here."

"Yes, I will not compromise you, monsieur, and I thank you."

With this the stranger walked on up the grand stairway into the gilded *salon*.

The playing was at its height, and a number of aristocratic gamblers were there, betting largely upon the turn of a card.

But these seemed to hold no particular interest for the visitor, and he sauntered around the room, still wearing his cloak and slouch hat.

At last he came to a table where a number were betting, and among them Colonel Brandt.

He had just lost the last dollar of the money given him by the Smuggler Queen, and was about to give his due-bill to the banker for a thousand, when the stranger said:

"Pardon me, colonel, but allow me to lend you what you need."

Colonel Brandt started, for there was something in the tone of the voice that struck him as familiar, and he gazed quickly at the speaker.

Before him he beheld one whom he did not remember to have seen before, and said haughtily:

"Pardon me, sir, but I do not remember to have seen you before."

"On the contrary, colonel, we have met before; but I have grown my beard since our last meeting, and my eyes failing me, I put on glasses."

Colonel Brandt turned pale, and stammered forth:

"My dear sir, I do remember you now; but I will not accept your most generous offer, while, if you will excuse me, Sortoris, I'll not play any more to-night."

"How do we stand, by the way?"

"Just even, colonel," answered the dealer.

"All right; good-night, for I will go with my old friend here," and Colonel Brandt nervously walked away with the stranger.

"You did not play long, sir," said the doorkeeper, as his generous visitor passed out with Colonel Brandt.

"No, I met an old friend, Colonel Brandt here, and concluded not to play to-night," and the two reached the street.

"Well, colonel, with money in your pocket you fell, and lost all that I gave you," said the stranger.

"You are playing the spy upon me, I see," the colonel retorted sternly.

"Oh, yes; I did not wish to see you ruin yourself."

"Why this interest in me, woman?"

"Well, if you are ruined, I wish to be the cause of your fall, do you see, and I had no idea of allowing you to pledge my jewels, as you would have done, had I not put on this disguise and gone back."

"Now, colonel, get your horse and go home, for I have no idea of letting you assassinate me."

"How dare you—"

"Don't get angry, for we understand each other, and so well, that I will make good to you a thousand of your losses, as you may need money at the prison."

"Here are a thousand dollars, colonel, and I warn you to go home, and not back to your *salon*."

"If you do not heed, beware!"

With this the disguised woman raised her hat politely, bowed and walked away.

But Colonel Brandt had received a warning he dared not disregard, and going to the stable where he always put his horse up when he rode into the city, he mounted and rode home, angry with himself and all the world, and from this humor the reader will remember he had not recovered when he awakened the following morning.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE COMPACT WITH RUDOLPHO.

THE second time she left the Palace of Chance the Smuggler Queen, as the reader now knows the cloaked and bearded stranger to be, walked off a little distance and then halting in the shadow, watched Colonel Brandt, as he stood where she had left him, in the full glare of the swinging lamp.

Presently the planter walked away to the stable, and the Smuggler Queen followed; but seeing him mount his horse and ride toward home she muttered, as she turned away:

"The warning had good effect. Now to see Don Rudolpho!"

Ten minutes after she reached the shop of the money-lender, just as the clerk was closing the door, for Rudolpho kept late hours, as many of his customers dropped in after night, and many of them, too, were men who could not stand inspection by sunlight.

"Is the Don in?" she asked.

"He is, senor."

"Can I see him?"

"I will bear your name, senor."

"Restel."

Bono walked off, to soon return and state that the Don would see the Senor Restel.

"In Heaven's name, lady, what new dodge is this?" exclaimed the money-lender, as Rita entered his private office, and throwing herself into a chair, removed her hat and false beard.

"I have been tracking the planter," was the reply.

"Colonel Brandt?"

"Of course—who else?"

"Well, lady?"

"My husband escapes to-morrow night."

"Hah! you are sure of this?" and the money-lender changed color.

"Yes, I am sure of it."

"You have arranged it, then?"

"I have arranged that he gets out of prison, drives along the river-road, and is there to be rescued by some of my men."

"And then, lady?"

"Then he is to take a boat and pull for the schooner Sea Fox, which is to be already in the possession of your men."

"This is a desperate undertaking, lady."

"Captain Barto is in a desperate fix, senor."

"Granted; but why would it not be better to have him drive at once to the lake-shore and board your lugger?"

"I need the lugger where she is, senor, for another purpose, so you must do as you said, and get me a crew to seize the Sea Fox."

"It is such a short notice, lady."

"Gold buys time, Don Rudolpho."

"Yes, gold will work wonders, lady."

"And I have the gold to give you."

"You will need how many men?"

"One hundred, for he must have a good crew."

"He will not then use the vessel as a

means of escape to another land, but raise the black flag again, I take it, from your words?"

"Of course he will remain a pirate, for there is no other life open to him; but for the present he will seek other waters in which to hoist his flag."

"Lady, it will cost a round sum to get men on such short notice, and good men, too."

"It must be done, cost what it will."

"I have some three-score I can count on, and soon pick up; but you want more."

"Yes, one hundred good men."

"The Sea Fox has about a dozen on board of the old crew."

"Yes, and you can buy them."

"Perhaps they are not for sale, lady."

"Bah! all men are for sale, Don Rudolpho, if one has the money to buy."

"I tell you to buy them, cost what they will."

"The Sea Fox is fortunately away just now."

"Yes, and you can go on board, or send some reliable person—Hah! I will go myself, and I'll guarantee the schooner is mine one hour after dark."

"You are a wonderful woman, Lady Rita."

"You prove yourself a wonderful man then, by carrying out my plans."

"Listen, I wish twenty men at the Live Oak point between the town and Brandt's mansion."

"They must be on the other side of the river at sunset, cross in boats, and you have a man there to meet them, whom you can trust."

"I know the man, lady."

"Good! let him be there, and when the Brandt carriage comes along, he must spring out, knife the horses to prevent their running, drag the guards out and kill them, and bear the prisoner to the boat and thence to the schooner."

"In the mean time, Don Rudolpho, you must send the remainder of your men on board the schooner, where I will be, and I will see that the crew there offer no resistance."

"Then, when the boats come with my husband, the Sea Fox shall fly down the river to safety."

"Do you see my plan?"

"Yes, lady, and I trust all will work well."

"All shall go well, Senor Rudolpho, for I will not fail in my part and see that you do not in yours."

"Here, use the jewels, and they will give you ample means for your purpose."

"To-morrow I will see you again."

"Good-night."

With this the Smuggler Queen dashed the gems down upon the table, and, resuming her beard and hat, left the room, the money-lender rising politely and bowing her out.

As she departed, he called to his clerk and said:

"Bono, go to the quarters of Captain Mendez and tell him to come here at once and bring his lieutenant with him."

"Yes, senor," and the youth disappeared.

"Now I will plot, too, my beautiful Smuggler Queen," said Don Rudolpho, and his eye had a wicked gleam in it as he spoke.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DUEL FOR LIFE.

BUT to return to the Witches' Isle, and the scene that followed the return of the giant guard and his prisoner.

During the absence of her guard, or watchman, the Witch sat in her hideous chair and gazed fixedly upon the young midshipman, who, though nervous at the look or rather stare of one whom he certainly had cause to dread, and could not but believe was in some way allied to the Evil One, yet met her glance unflinchingly.

In fact Irving Brandt had made up his mind to meet what came with undaunted mien.

He had escaped from the revenge of the Smuggler Queen, and he had found safety in swimming to a craft from which the smugglers had fled in terror.

He had put foot on the island, faced its supernatural terrors, and yet lived, and, face to face with the dreaded Witch herself, he yet

had from her lips a promise of life, should he prove victor in a combat she had arranged for him.

If victorious, her words told him that he became her slave.

So be it, he thought; as a slave he would plot to escape, and, if he found a way, witches, wizards, bloodhounds and all the terrors of the island should not prevent him.

Such were his thoughts as he stood under the gaze of the old Witch, and as he saw the bloodhounds coming down the ravine, and knew that the giant and his prisoner were not far behind, he muttered:

"I'll escape if I have to set sail in that infernal coffin craft."

In a little while the giant guard and his prisoner came in sight.

It was Perdido, the mutineer.

"You know that man; I see it by your face," said the Witch.

"Oh, yes, I have seen him before."

"He was a mutineer?"

"Yes, and worse still, sought to kill and rob a woman, which, smuggler though she was, showed his dastard nature," boldly responded Irving.

"You are a good swordsman?" queried the Witch.

"Yes, a fair one."

"And he?"

"I know not what he can do."

"You will soon find out."

A moment after the guard and his prisoner arrived.

Perdido was a Spaniard by birth, and his nature was full of superstition.

He had been a sailor, too, once an under-officer in the Spanish navy, and afterward a pirate, and he was not one to shrink from any red deed; but he now shrunk back as he faced that dread old being in her death-chair.

He had had a hard struggle for life the night of the wreck, but, with several companions, he had clung to the wreckage of mast and rigging until washed ashore.

Then they had sought a light visible up a ravine, and not once suspecting where they were.

They had just come in sight of the cave, and shrunk back in horror into a thicket, when Irving came in sight, and then the bloodhounds, scenting strangers near, had rushed upon them.

As fleet as a deer, Irving Brandt had escaped, and Perdido had managed to draw himself up into a tree; but before his eyes he beheld the sickening sight of his comrades torn to pieces by the savage brutes, heard their frenzied shrieks of terror and anguish.

Then he had been discovered by the giant guard and made a prisoner, to be thrown into a ghastly den, and have the same mad brutes his keepers.

These sights had told upon Perdido, and now, as he faced the Witch, he was white-faced and haggard-eyed.

"Do you know that youth?" asked the Witch, pointing to Irving.

"Yes, he is a mutineer," was the reply.

"Liar!" cried Irving, moving toward him; but the Witch checked him with her wand and asked:

"Why do you call him a mutineer?"

"He led a mutiny on our ship and ran her ashore, to drown all on board, that he might possess the booty she carried, for he did not know this to be the Witches' Isle," was the unabashed response of the mutineer.

The Witch smiled and glanced at her guard; but he showed no sign that he had heard what Perdido had said, and she remarked:

"Well, sir, you tell different stories; but as it is no affair of mine which of you is guilty, and both of you cannot remain alive upon this island, I have determined that one of you must die."

"He is guilty, let him die," urged Perdido, quickly.

Irving smiled, but made no reply, and the Witch continued:

"The one who lives must be my abject slave."

"That youth does not beg for his life."

"His conscience is so fearful he wishes to drown it by death," and Perdido spoke with a nervous quickness that showed how well he knew his danger, and yet loved life so well as to beg piteously for it.

"Of the two faces, stamped as they are

seen by me, you bear the guilty one," said the Witch, sternly.

"No, no; I am not guilty, and if you spare my life I will be your slave."

"It is not for me to spare your life."

"To whom then am I to plead?" and the cowardly wretch glanced earnestly about him.

"To your own nerve, your courage, and your skill with a sword."

"I do not understand you."

"Bring forth the rapiers!" ordered the Witch.

The guard entered the cavern, Perdido's eyes following him, while Irving Brandt was gazing down the ravine out upon the glimpse of blue water beyond.

In a moment the giant returned, bearing in his hand two superb blades, both exactly alike.

"There, sir, is the weapon that must save or lose your life for you."

"Take your choice!" ordered the Witch.

Perdido looked at the blades and then at her, while he allowed his hand to rest upon the hilt of one.

"Take it, and with it face the one you accuse, for it shall be a duel for life between you."

"If you kill him, you will save your life and become my slave."

"If he kills you, the same fate awaits him."

"Now cross weapons, and let the play begin."

The Witch spoke with the utmost calmness, and, now fully realizing what was expected of him, Perdido seized a weapon and wheeled toward the midshipman, his face flushed with hope, for never had he met his superior with the sword.

"Ready!" said the deep tones of the giant, and confronting each other, the two blades crossed with a ring and a clash that made the sparks fly.

CHAPTER XXX.

A VILLAIN'S SOLILOQUY.

It was already late at night, verging on the hour of twelve, when Don Rudolpho dispatched his clerk Bono after one Captain Mendez.

But the Don was accustomed to late hours, and in New Orleans then, as now, most of the deeds of devilry were done under the cover of darkness, and the money-lender had determined upon a rare piece of rascality.

As he paced to and fro, his face writhed with his thoughts, a thing that would not have happened had there been any one present to behold him, for the money-lender had no tell-tale countenance.

And, as he walked he soliloquized, and aloud, for he knew no ear could hear, and his voice gave emphasis to his thoughts.

"Well," he said, "I will be a fool if I longer delay."

"I love that woman to desperation, and her husband stands in my way."

"And he the one who sought to kill me with that fatal powder, but then, had I not opened the packages, I would not have suffered, that is true."

"And how that dead boy haunts me, whom I had such trouble in getting out of the house after the powder had killed him."

"But he is safe at the bottom of the river now, thank Heaven, and it is believed that he ran off and went to sea."

"Well, I guess he will go to sea when the river floats his body there," and the money-lender chuckled at his low wit.

"Now that woman refused my love when I was masked the other day, and asked her to become my wife, and I cannot wonder at it; but, with Captain Barto, as they call Barton Keys, out of the way, I believe she will turn to me, and I shall at least try her."

"If she does not willingly, then I will make her my wife anyhow; but I think I can win her by kindness, after he is out of the way."

"Now, to accomplish all that she wishes done is no easy matter."

"She says she will handle the few men left on the Sea Fox, and I do not doubt but that she will, if she gives a fortune to each one, for, though they reformed under their chief Palafox, 'once a thief, always a thief,' and they will be open to bribery."

"The craft is all stored for a cruise, with ammunition and all on board, and can drop

down the river on the further shore, without attracting attention at the navy fort."

"And if she does, we will run the gantlet of the fire, while, if they send the Sea Ghoul in chase, why, as she outran the Sea Ghoul and captured her, it is not likely that she will be overhauled, though I hear that the navy commandant has put some extra rig on the schooner that Captain Palafox suggested to have done."

"Now what a strange man that Palafox is."

"Why, when he was a sea robber, he only brought two vessels under foreign flags, and then, when he sent his booty here, he always gave one-third of the money to charity."

"Now he has turned honest, bears a roving commission under Government, and a pardon in his pocket, and I know does a great deal of good with his money."

"Well, every man to his own liking; but he is one I prefer to have for a friend rather than an enemy."

"But to my little scheme."

"Now I can get Mendez and his men to carry it out for me, and as I put the old pirate afloat in a fine vessel, he must obey my orders for the present."

"Let me see what is best to be done."

"I have it: I will leave Bono in charge for a few days, and then I will know just what will be the upshot of this foolish love affair of mine, for foolish it is."

"But I cannot help it."

"I love the woman more than my money, and I will sacrifice half I have, if need be, to get her."

"Oh! if the world only knew what Don Rudolpho, the money-lender, was worth, would not a howl be raised?"

"But I take big risks, and I make big profits."

"Now there is my trade with sea-rovers—see how that pays me, and my interests on loans bring in a fortune."

"But I deserve it."

"Who would think, to look at my fresh, youthful-looking face, that I had touched the half-way mark to a hundred years?"

"No one, for men call me young, and I look it."

"Ah me! I wish I could clear up one mystery of the past."

"It is the nightmare of my life, for I cannot believe her and her child dead."

"Yet I should not doubt it."

"And even if they were not dead, they would never escape from where I left them, and more, they would never find out Don Rudolpho."

"No, no; I must not think of them."

"It only worries me and makes me nervous, and that it is that makes men grow old before their time."

"Well, I am determined upon this scheme of mine to win this woman, come what will, and this night I shall lay the plot."

"Ah! there is the knocker resounding; it is Bono, returning with old Mendez and his lieutenant," and thus interrupted in his soliloquy, Don Rudolpho arose and passed through his silent shop to open the outer door.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A TRIO OF VILLAINS.

THERE were three persons at the outer door—Bono, the clerk, who had stepped into Perdido's shoes, and two others.

"Bono, you are at liberty to go," said the Don, and he ushered his visitors into his sanctum. "Be seated, senors, and there is wine, and here cigars and *cigarritos*."

One of the two men was a grizzly looking old seaman of fifty-five, with white hair and beard, a fierce, black eye, and a skin like parchment.

The other was a young man of half his years, and so much like him that it was easy to see that they stood in the relationship to each other of father and son.

Both were dressed in sailor costume, and there was beneath their loose jackets the suspicion of a belt of arms.

They both took a pull at the decanter, lighted a cigar, the old man, a *cigarrito* the young one, and then turned to their host, who had thrown himself back in his easy-chair and was awaiting their convenience to begin the conversation.

"Captain Mendez, you have been in hard luck, I believe, since you ran your schooner

on the Florida reefs to escape capture?" said Don Rudolpho.

"Hard luck indeed, Don, I can tell you, and I have had to hide here like a rat in a hole, owing to the licks against we sea rovers of late; but I was not born to despair, and have hopes of getting a vessel con."

"Yes, you have hope, for I intend to furnish you with a craft."

"You! this is indeed good of you, Don Rudolpho."

"Of course I have my own ends to forward."

"Oh, of course; what man has not?"

"No man."

"But if you help me, it is but right that I should help you."

"So I think, Captain Mendez, and that is why I sent for you."

"Now, how many men have you?"

"I can put my hand on a clean half-hundred."

"In how long a time?"

"By dawn, if need be."

"Good! that shows business; but can you not get a few more?"

"Yes, a score, perhaps."

"Well, I can furnish the balance through my agents."

"What! you need so large a crew?"

"Yes, ninety to a hundred."

"Desperate work, I guess, senor?"

"All outlaw work is desperate."

"True; well, I am ready to do anything, for I lost my gold with my schooner, and what you have on storage for me is running low."

"Now to the craft."

"What is she?"

"A schooner."

"Good, I feared she might be a fleet lugger, a brigantine, or something else for coast work."

"No, it is for any work you please, after you have done the service I demand of you."

"Let me see, you have only about ten thousand to your credit with me, and I will pay you half of that, to fit out as you desire, and use the balance for you."

"The craft is the Sea Fox, and—"

"What! that splendid schooner?"

"Yes, and she is a good one and no mistake, and fleet as the wind, while she is in perfect condition."

"I have had my eye on her."

"You will now get your foot on her, Captain Mendez; but I will tell you what I wish you to do."

"Well, Don?"

"Get your men together on the other shore, to board the schooner in shore-boats; half an hour after dark."

"Yes."

"She will be already in my hands."

"Yes."

"Then I want your son, Lieutenant Carlos here, to take a score of men to Live Oak Point, above the town."

"I know it, senor," said the young man.

"You must go there in boats, and be there just after dark."

"Yes, senor."

"The river avenue runs by the point, you remember, and I wish you to place your men to watch for a carriage."

"From which direction will it come, senor?"

"From the town."

"It will contain four persons within, and perhaps one besides the driver on the box."

"Yes, six."

"True, and none of them must live."

"Not one, senor, if you say so."

"I do say so."

"You must knife or shoot the horses, fire on those on the box, and kill those inside the vehicle."

"Then, when you have done your work, make haste to your boats, and row for the schooner."

"The Sea Fox?"

"Yes, and your father will have her ready to put to sea."

"And then, senor?"

"I will be on the schooner, but hidden in a state-room, for I do not wish my presence known, and there will be one other."

"Yes."

"A woman, and she, too, may be in the state-room."

"If not, and she asks you what has become

of her husband, say that his guards killed him when you fired on them; but under no circumstances allow her to leave the schooner.

"If she becomes frantic, then seek me out in the state-room, and leave her to me.

"Then, when you are at sea, I wish you to land us at a certain island I will direct you to, and your duty is done, senors."

"We will gladly do as you wish, senor, and with a thousand thanks to you for your goodness, too," said the elder of the two pirates.

"See that you do all, and I ask no more; but there must be no mistake."

"There shall not be, senor."

"Then, senors, I bid you *au revoir*, for we shall meet upon the Sea Fox to-morrow night."

"Yes, and once more Buccaneer Mendez will be afloat again," said the old pirate, with a chuckle, as he took a deep drink of the liquor, and, accompanied by his equally wicked son, left the sanctum of the money-lender.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TRAITOR BOATSWAIN.

ALTHOUGH the sun arose in brilliancy the morning that was to usher in a most eventful day for many of the characters of my romance, in the afternoon it grew cloudy and threatened a storm.

But this dark aspect of the clouds did not deter a young sailor from springing into a skiff and pulling out upon the river.

He seemed to have no well-defined object in view, other than to amuse himself, and rowed here and there, looking at the different vessels at anchor in the stream.

At last he drew near a beautiful armed schooner, anchored off toward the other shore, and with few men upon her decks.

The craft was certainly as graceful in outline as a swan, and lay upon the waters in a saucy way that would greatly please a sailor's eye.

Her masts were tall, needle-pointed, raking, and evidently carried plenty of sail.

She shone like a sailor in inspection rig, and her guns looked dangerous.

"You have a pretty craft, sir," called out the young sailor, who was in the undress uniform of a midshipman.

He addressed a seaman leaning over the taffrail and watching him.

"Yes, sir, and she's as good as she's pretty," was the answer, and then he added:

"There's no officer on board to invite you, sir, and I'm in charge, that's only bo'sen, but you are welcome, sir, to take a closer look."

"I'll accept your kind invitation, my lad," was the cheery answer, and the midshipman went over the side, and was met by the boatswain, who saluted politely.

"What craft is this, my man?"

"The Sea Fox, sir."

"What, the schooner of the reformed pirate, Captain Palafox?"

"The same, sir."

"And where is her remarkable commander?"

"He took a run over to Mobile, sir, to get a few more men."

"Ah, yes; but were you one of his crew when he was a rover?"

"Yes, sir."

"And all the men here?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have not many on board?"

"Only nine of us, sir."

"And how do you like the quiet life you lead?"

"Well, sir, it's safer for the neck than piracy, seeing as we carry our pardons in our pocket."

"But piracy was better for the pocket, eh?"

"Ah, yes, sir."

"And I suppose you all got rich off of booty?"

"Not we, sir, for I don't believe that there is one of us who could raise a hundred pesos this blessed day."

"Yet you love money?"

"Oh, yes, sir; the man as don't love the glitter of gold is in a bad way."

"Well, my man, I have it in my power to make you rich."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes."

"How is that, sir?"

"Well, for a certain service you can render me if you enlist under my command."

"Ah, sir; I fear we would have to wait for our riches."

"You need not wait one hour, if you say you will serve me."

The seaman looked at the handsome young midshipman in amazement, and then asked:

"What to do, sir?"

"Go to sea."

"On what, sir?"

"A schooner."

"Under the Government flag?"

"No, my man."

"Ah, sir; you are deceiving me."

"No; for this looks like gold, does it not?" and he revealed a bag of precious metal.

"It is gold, sir."

"And there are crisp bank-notes, you see?"

"Yes, sir; I see them, and there are plenty of 'em."

"Now, my man, I wish to buy a schooner."

"I don't know where you can get one, sir."

"I do."

"Where?"

"This one."

"Oh, no, sir; she's not for sale."

"Any craft is for sale if you give her price for her."

"The captain would not part with the Sea Fox, sir."

"He might not; but you would."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"But she does not belong to me, sir."

"Now, look here, my man; you have a pardon in your pocket?"

"Yes, sir."

"Keep it there, and you just take a cruise with me, and when you wish to land I'll put you in a port, and you'll have a snug sum to take care of you with."

"This vessel suits me, and you say there are nine of you on board, and I will pay you well."

"Oh, sir!"

"I will pay you five thousand dollars, cash, and I will give half of that sum to each of your comrades."

"If you do not wish to remain with me after I get into blue water, I will land you, and you can return and state that the schooner was seized while the watch were below, and you all were put in irons."

"If you wish to go with me I'll make you third officer, and you and your men shall share liberally in booty money."

Then, without waiting for a refusal, the young midshipman counted out the money for the boatswain, who said, in husky tones:

"But, sir, some of the men may not consent."

"Then pick out those you are in doubt of and let them go ashore on leave; but here is the money for all," and he counted over the amount needed.

"Now, my man, boats will be aboard here just after dark, and you do your duty."

"I will, sir, for you have given me too much money for me to keep honest."

"I'll do all you tell me, sir."

"Good! now I must get on shore, but I will be out in plenty of time, and you have the schooner all ready to run out."

With this the midshipman left the side of the schooner and rowed leisurely shoreward, watching the clouds as they rolled upward over the heavens, threatening to break in a storm by nightfall.

"That is settled; but for fear there may be some failure, some treachery, I will drive out to the lake and have Granger ready with the lugger."

So said the young sailor, and the words betrayed her as the Smuggler Queen, as the reader has already doubtless discovered.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN MORTAL COMBAT.

WHEN Irving Brandt was confronted with his enemy, the man he was to meet in mortal combat, he made up his mind that he would do all in his power to strive for the honor of becoming the slave of the old Witch, especially as not to be a slave meant death to him.

If in slavery he had some chance to escape;

but if run through by Perdido's sword, then the end came right there.

He had confidence in his own prowess as a swordsman; but then he discovered, as the mutineer saw what his life depended on, the color had come back to his cheek, and his nerve came with it.

This proved conclusively to the observing midshipman that the mutineer was a good swordsman, or at least believed that he was, or again, had a poor opinion of the prowess of his adversary.

Thus the two faced each other, the giant guard standing upon one side, the old Witch seated upon the other, and the bloodhounds squatted around with that hungry look that told how thoroughly they were convinced that they were interested in the remains of one or the other of the combatants, for, to speak the truth, the bones of human beings which the Witch had, held a certain polish, as though they had been well picked by the fangs of the ravenous brutes.

In fact, everybody that came ashore, every wreck that had cast its dead there, had furnished food for the bloodhounds, and they had begun to look upon mankind as a delicacy for them alone.

When the swords crossed, Perdido at once set to work to kill the Planter Midshipman, and made several quick and vicious passes.

But, to his surprise, he did not either disarm him or find a weak spot in his guard.

This made the mutineer more cautious, for he was not so confident as he had been.

But, nerving himself again, he pressed the attack with savage vigor, and again was met at every point with a skill and coolness that surprised him.

"You are superb swordsmen, senors; both of you," said the Witch, serenely, while the giant guard remarked, with enthusiasm:

"Yes, better men with blades I never saw; but go on, senors, for one or the other must fall."

Again the mutineer opened the fight, and once more he was foiled, for every pass, every thrust, cut, or slash—and Perdido tried all—was met by the midshipman with perfect coolness.

A third time the blades were lowered to rest, and the mutineer led off in the act, while Irving seemed willing to keep the combat pushing to the bitter end.

Once more the mutineer sprung to the attack, and this time with a ferocity which his face expressed.

He knew that he had to break into that impenetrable guard, or lose, and he devoted his whole soul to the work.

With a fury that was terrible he pressed on, and yet not one step would the youth give to him.

Then he seemed to again wish a rest; but Irving would not allow it.

Here the hardened sinews of the boy began to tell against those of the man, who had been confined for so long a period with indoor work.

Once his strength began to fail Perdido, Irving pressed him in his turn, and step by step drove him back.

He knew that he had the mutineer at his mercy, and that he could kill him at any moment; but he abhorred the taking of life, and cared not to kill one so wholly in his power, so he struck up his weapon, and then by a skillful twist, disarmed him.

The mutineer was as white as death, which he certainly expected.

But Irving said, quickly:

"I have no desire to kill you, so give you your life," and he turned away.

"No, no, no! this will not do! You must kill him!" shrieked the old Witch.

"Yes, you will have to kill him," said the giant guard, and the bloodhounds howled their disapprobation of the proceedings.

"I will not kill a man who is at my mercy," firmly said the midshipman.

"Then he must fight you again," said the Witch.

"It is useless, for I could have run him through the first pass had I desired," answered Irving.

"Then, as he is not your equal with the blade, you shall fight with pistols, for I have said it, *one of you must die!*"

Irving knew that the old Witch meant what she said, and answered:

"As you please, madam."

"I am at the senor's service."
Perdido had not moved from the spot where he stood when disarmed, but had stood gazing upon the scene with a piteous expression in his eyes.

He felt thankful to the midshipman for sparing his life, and yet feared that he would yet take it at the command of the Witch.

He turned quickly at the words of the old hag, to use pistols, and his face again lighted up.

He knew his power as a shot was, if anything, superior to his skill as a swordsman.

Of late he had practiced more with a pistol than with a blade.

The former required no strength, when to handle a sword well one needed both strength and endurance.

In his then tired state he could not hope to send a bullet true; but with rest he might, so he said:

"It is hardly fair, good Mother Witch, to ask me to fight now with pistols, when my sinews are throbbing with the strain upon them."

"You shall have half an hour to rest."

"And you, English, get the weapons—those dueling pistols that we took from on board the vessel you were on."

"Yes, and which were mine," said the giant guard, sadly, and then added:

"They have each killed their man, young sir," and he addressed Irving.

Going into the cavern, he soon returned bearing two handsome gold-mounted dueling pistols of a style greatly sought after by duelists of a hundred years ago.

These he carefully looked over, cleaned, oiled and loaded.

As he was doing the latter, Perdido stepped up to his side and said in a low tone:

"I will give you a thousand in gold, if you will put no bullet in that youth's weapon."

"Villain! how dare you attempt to bribe me to such an act?" sternly said the giant, half-raising his arm as though to strike the mutineer.

But instantly he checked his anger and said calmly:

"The weapons are ready, Mother Witch."

"And you have regained your nerve, sir?" she asked, turning to the mutineer.

"Yes; I am ready," he said, in a low tone.

"And you?"

"I am ready, too," was the midshipman's indifferent reply.

"Then place them ten paces apart, English, and give them their weapons."

"I will give the word to fire, and the one who touches the trigger before it, you, English, shoot down in his tracks," sternly said the old Witch of the Isle.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RITA'S COUNTERPLOT.

WHEN the Smuggler Queen, in her disguise of a young sailor, reached the shore, she paid the boatman for the use of his skiff, and seeking a stable hired a vehicle in which to drive out to the lake-shore.

Arriving there she bade the driver await her, and taking a shore boat she rowed out to the Sea Owl, which, under its disguise of an honest coaster, was lying as complacently at anchor as any of those vessels about it that had a just claim to honesty.

Chester Granger met her at the side, and instantly recognized her.

His face wore an anxious look, which his words explained, for he said:

"I was becoming anxious for your safety, Lady Captain, from your long stay."

"I have been detained, Granger; but all goes well."

"I am glad of that, Lady Captain."

"I have plotted and planned, and at last hit upon a scheme that is to work out salvation or ruin to-night."

"I trust not the latter."

"It shall not be if I can prevent it; but let me tell you of my plan," and the Smuggler Queen told the story of how the pirate chief was to be taken out of prison to the home of Colonel Brandt, but was to be met upon the river avenue and rescued.

She also told of her visit to the Sea Fox, and the arrangements she had made with the boatswain.

"This looks cheerful," said Granger, but he did not by any means feel cheerful at the prospect, for if the Sea Ghoul was hanged,

he hoped to step into his place in the heart of the Smuggler Queen, with whom he was perfectly infatuated.

"Now, how can I serve you, Lady Captain?" he said, pleasantly.

"I will tell you."

"And I am wholly at your service, lady."

"I know that, Granger, but let me tell you that I intend to counterplot."

"Counterplot, lady?"

"Yes, for I leave to strangers the carrying out of my plans."

"I see."

"Should they fail me, then my husband would be lost."

"True."

"Should those who are to attack the carriage fail to be there, then all will be ruined."

"As a matter of course."

"And should they be all right, and the crew of the Sea Fox prove treacherous, then we would lose all."

"Most certainly."

"So I wish you to come to the city with three of your best men."

"Yes, lady."

"I desire you all to be most thoroughly armed."

"Yes."

"The man who keeps that sailor tavern on the shore will send you in, as he has a wagon, and you can come to my inn."

"Yes, lady."

"There I will meet you, and we will take a vehicle and follow the Brandt carriage."

"Ah!"

"If it passes the Live Oak Point without being halted, then we will drive alongside, shoot those on the box, and the horses, and rescue my husband ourselves, and then come here."

"A good plan, lady."

"You must have the lugger all ready to sail, and, with the storm threatening, and which I thought would break long ago, we will not be apt to have many abroad to trouble us."

"But the Sea Fox, lady?"

"Oh, if the men fail me at the Live Oak Point, those that are to board the Sea Fox and take her will also fail, so it would be risking too much to go to her, and perhaps be beaten off."

"Very true."

"Even if her crew were true, we would not dare put to sea with so few men on board, so shall have to take her another time—Ha! I have it."

"Well, lady?"

"If my first plot miscarries, you can come on here with my husband, and I will remain in the city to cut out the Sea Fox at the first opportunity, for I do not wish to lose that craft."

"You take big risks, Lady Captain."

"We all do, Granger; but you can run the lugger to the old retreat, and I will come there with the Sea Fox as soon as I can cut her out."

"I trust the first plan will succeed, lady, for I dislike to have you take such risks."

"Life is not worth the living, Granger, without the man I love with me."

Granger sighed, and the Smuggler Queen continued:

"Now I must return to the city, for the day is getting old apace, and I am determined that all shall go well."

"Remember what I have told you, and be at the inn where I put up just about dark."

"I will not fail you, lady."

Then the Smuggler Queen returned to the shore, and bade the driver go rapidly back to the city.

Arriving at her inn, she paid him well, and told him to have a pair of fresh horses hitched up and come for her at sunset.

"I will not forget, sir," said the driver, delighted with his generous fee.

"Are you afraid to drive hard, my man?"

"No, monsieur."

"Not afraid of a little night work?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"And can keep your mouth shut, if you have a few of these in it?" and the disguised woman placed in his hand a few pieces of gold.

"I can keep a secret, monsieur."

"Then you can make money by it."

"Be here at sunset and wait for me, and

hitch up a pair of animals that have go in them if you need to have them."

"I will, sir," and the delighted coche drove off, while the Smuggler Queen sought the shop of the money-lender.

"Well, Don Rudolpho, what tidings have you?"

"I have an officer and men ready to board the Sea Fox, lady, and another party to be on hand at Live Oak Point."

"How many in all?"

"About ninety."

"And there are nine on board the schooner?"

"You have been there, then?"

"Yes, and bought her crew; but will it storm or not?"

"It has been threatening since noon, and for your sake I hope it will."

"Yes, it will keep curious people indoors, and make watchmen hunt the lee side of sheltering places."

"I am glad all works well, Don Rudolpho, and you shall not be forgotten."

"I thank you, lady; but is there anything else I can serve you in?"

"Nothing; but farewell until we meet again," and the Smuggler Queen hastened away, for it was now near the sunset hour, and in a short while more the success or ruin of her plot and counterplot would be known.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SEA FOX AND THE MONEY-LENDER.

DON RUDOLPHO, the money-lender, was full of business.

He had a desperate plot on hand to carry out his own ends.

He loved gold more than all else in the world, but had gotten a strange idea into his head—for he had no heart—that he loved Rita, the Lady Captain.

His intentions toward her he deemed honorable, for he intended to make her his wife, though he had to marry her by force.

But to do this he must first get rid of her husband, the pirate chief.

By waiting, he might see Barton Keys hanged and thus Rita be made a widow.

But he knew the indomitable pluck of the woman, he knew that she would not allow the Sea Ghoul to die at the yard-arm, and hence he dared not wait.

He had it in his power then to seem to help her, and yet to kill her husband.

He had drilled young Mendez, the pirate lieutenant, well in his duties, and as Rita would be on board the schooner, hiding in a state-room, all would go well.

Once she was at sea he had it all his own way, for Mendez, the buccaneer, was under pay from him.

Such were the thoughts of the money-lender, when a visitor was announced.

"Who is he, Bono?"

"I have seen him before, senor, but some time ago; he is one you admit to your private office."

"I do not know who he can be; but show him in."

And in walked a man, about the middle height of men, quick in his movements, strong-faced and with the manners of a gentleman.

He was dressed in an undress uniform, and was evidently a sailor.

"Don Rudolpho, how are you?" he said as he entered.

"Why, Captain Palafox, is this indeed you?" cried the money-lender.

"It is indeed," and the seaman took the hand coldly which the money-lender warmly extended to him.

"Why, I did not expect to see you again, captain, since—"

"I have turned honest, you mean?"

"Well, Rudolpho, I tell you the truth when I say my heart was never in the red work."

"I was a wild fellow, my father sent me to sea, and had the screws put on me, tearing me away from a loved wife, a mere girl, as I was a mere boy, and I went to the mad, for I was led into a mutiny on board a Spanish craft, and raised the sable colors upon her."

"But I never attacked a home vessel, and I always spared life, and never harmed or robbed a woman."

"My wife I went back to, she accompanied me to sea, and died, leaving me an ocean born daughter."

"Thus I drifted about as an outlaw, until, ashamed of my work, and for my child's sake, I gave up the buccaneer life, hunted down the sea-rovers, and got a pardon for myself and crew."

"Now you know me as I am; but I am not one to betray one who served me in outlaw days, although you served yourself better than you did me, so I have never given a whisper that you were more than a money-lender."

"Oh, I knew you would never do that, Captain Palafox; but there is a balance due you in my hands."

"I know it, and I want it, for it squares up my accounts with the past."

"I'll pay it to you now; do you remember the amount?"

"Yes—seven thousand four hundred dollars."

"Right; but you are making as great a name under the American flag, captain, as you did under the black one."

"Yes, and I shall make a greater one, and it will be an honest name."

"I do not seek to betray any of those whom I knew in my outlaw days, but all whom I catch upon the high seas I shall make war upon."

"Ah! thank you for this money, and here is my receipt in full."

This was written and given the money-lender, after the captain had counted the bills, and then he continued:

"Now, Rudolpho, I know that you are a good man at furnishing crews for red work, spies for dirty work, and an assassin if need be, so I have come to have a talk with you."

"Speak plainly, Captain Palafox," said Don Rudolpho, quietly.

"I shall, and not mince my words either."

"There is one family in this city that I hold a deep interest in."

"I need not tell you that it is Colonel Brandt, his son and daughter, and Mr. Bradford Carr, the young tutor, who so long rested under the suspicion of being a pirate."

"Well, I do not intend that harm shall befall any of those I have named, and I look to you that it shall not."

"To me?" and the money-lender elevated his eyebrows.

"Yes, to you, for whoever means them harm will seek your aid."

"My aid?"

"Don't dodge, Rudolpho, for I mean what I say, and I came to tell you to beware how you lend aid to any villain that intends harm to them."

"The colonel is a fine old gentleman, but as weak as a drunkard where cards are concerned, and would stake his soul to win."

"He has been led into snares innumerable and escaped; but don't let any one urge you to make him go wrong."

"Again, Bradford Carr is a noble man, and he has suffered enough, and you must not help cause him more anguish."

"He loves Miss Brandt, as she does him, and they are to be married before long, so don't put a stumbling-block in their way."

"The young Planter Midshipman, Irving Brandt, is pretty well able to take care of himself; but he does not wish to die from a knife-thrust in the back."

"Why do you tell me all this, Captain Palafox?"

"Because I know that you are interested in Barton Keys, the Sea Ghoul, and that his wife, the Smuggler Queen, looks to you to aid her in her wicked revenge."

"If you can help her to get her husband's neck out of the noose it is in, I have nothing to say."

"If you can, eluding all vigilance, help her cut a craft out, for him to again hoist the black flag, do so, for that is, in your business, legitimate work."

"But keep hands off of the Brandts, or you make war with me, and, Rudolpho, you do not wish to do that."

"No, captain, I do not."

"That is right, for if you do make war with them, I'll sacrifice you, by Heaven!"

"Now I have given you your warning, and I have gotten my money, and I will leave, not to call again, Don Rudolpho, unless you force me so to do."

The money-lender made no reply, and the daring man, whose deeds had won for him the name of the Sea Fox, took his leave.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SEA FOX WARNED.

CAPTAIN PALAFOX had returned to the city sooner than he was expected back, and his suspicions were aroused that all was not going well for the Brandt family.

The mysterious disappearance of the Vulture, with Irving Brandt on board, he set down not to wreck, but to capture, and he was anxious to find out who had captured the vessel.

He had his spies at work, and they reported that the colonel was playing cards again, and this Captain Palafox knew meant ruin to him.

He was determined to ferret out all he could, and from certain things told him by his spies, he was confident that there was a crew being engaged for some secret work, and he was anxious to know just what this was.

His visit to the money-lender was to give him a warning, should he be aiding any plot against Colonel Brandt and his family, and to also see if he could make any discovery that would serve him.

Leaving the money-lender's the captain returned to his quarters, changed his dress and appearance in a great degree, and then sought a handsome house in one of the most fashionable neighborhoods of the city.

In answer to his knock a servant appeared, and he said:

"I would like to see my daughter, Miss Myrtle Marsden."

Now at the Academy the Sea Fox was looked upon as a respectable sea captain of wealth, and, other than Irving and Maud Brandt, who had got her to go there, no one knew Myrtle Marsden, as she was called, as the daughter of a once noted sea rover.

Entering the parlor the captain had hardly taken a seat when there came into the room one of those visions of beauty, a young girl just budding into maidenhood, which one now and then meets with in life.

Graceful as a fawn, with large, lustrous eyes, golden hair and a form that was growing into perfection of outline, Myrtle Marsden was one of those girls whose character was as lovely as her face, and she had won the hearts of all at the school, from the madam to the humblest scholar.

After a pleasant hour with his daughter, and in which the conversation was mostly about the Brandts, Captain Palafox Marsden took his leave of Myrtle, whose eyes filled with tears as she spoke of the Vulture so long unheard from, and upon which was Irving Brandt, for the young girl held a deep interest in the young midshipman.

Leaving the school it was the intention of the captain to take a drive out to Brandt Mansion, when he was accosted by an old seaman, with gray head and hair, and the look of one who was in hard luck.

"I say, cap'n, excuse my hailin' a man-o'-war, sir, when I'm nothing but an old coasting craft, but hain't you the Sea Fox?" said the old sailor.

"I was once so called, my good man."

"I sailed under you, sir, some years ago."

"My name is Jack Doan."

"I don't recall your face, my man; but I have had many a man under me in my day, and cannot remember all their faces."

"But you seem to have had an unlucky cruise, so here is a little gold for you."

"Cap'n, I thanks you, sir, and, as you shows the true sailor clean through, and hasn't been spilt because you carries a pardon in your pocket, I'll just tell you a secret."

"A secret?"

"Yes, cap'n."

"What about, my man?"

"About something you would like to know."

"Ah! well, out with it, and if it's worth anything I'll pay you for it."

"Cap'n, it's worth a good deal to a man to save his ship, hain't it?"

"It is indeed, my man."

"There is some bad men as follows salt water, and fresh water too, for that matter, in this town."

"I'll readily admit that."

"Then there is a number as would like to take a good craft and go to sea in her, with the black flag flying from their peaks?"

"Yes."

"I know just such a lot of men."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and I know the craft they have their eye on."

"Hail you are becoming interesting, my man."

"I know that there are those that are getting ready to cut a craft out and make a pirate of her."

"How do you know this, my man?"

"From hearing."

"What?"

"The plan hatched."

"Where?"

"In my lodging-house."

"Aha! and the craft?"

"Is the Sea Fox."

"My schooner?"

"Yes, cap'n."

"Do you mean this?"

"I do."

"Now, my old friend, as you have told me thus much, I wish you to tell me more, and you shall be well paid, and here is a handful of gold to make your tongue run smooth."

The old sailor pocketed the gold, with many thanks, and then said:

"You are gen'rous, cap'n; but it's just like you, for you hain't changed at all."

"But tell me what you know."

"Well, cap'n, I has a number of ship-mates in my lodging-house, and there has been a clipper-built fellow among 'em, with plenty of gold, getting 'em to enlist for service at sea."

"Of course he didn't want me, for I'm too old and shaky; but the lads told him I was square, and so he talked out before me."

"And he was enlisting men to steal my vessel?"

"He was doing just that, cap'n, and it is all to be done in one week from now."

"Then I will have time to look about me and prepare to receive them."

"Yes, cap'n, but there's no hurry; and as you has been so generous to me before I told you anything, I'll just ship right now in your service, and go back to my anchorage, and get all out of the lads I can; but you had better not show yourself, for if they thought you was in town they'd hardly try your craft, for they know you couldn't be caught asleep."

"It's because you are away, or they think so, that they are after your craft."

"Well, I'll go to my quarters, and keep close, and I'll depend upon you, old ship-mate, to look after my interests."

"Here is more gold for you, and if you get any news come to me at once and I will pay you well."

"Here is my address," and Captain Palafox gave the old sailor the name of the inn where he put up.

Then the Sea Fox walked on, saying to himself:

"I felt that I could not be too watchful, for I knew there was more trouble brewing, and now to find it out and thwart them."

"My beautiful vessel, forsooth! Well, they shall not get her, that is certain."

But the old sailor was standing looking after the Sea Fox, and as he disappeared around a neighboring corner, he muttered:

"Aha, Palafox, the reformed pirate, I felt that you would spoil all by your presence; but I have thrown you off the scent by putting you on your guard, and your pretty craft will be cut out this very night, while you are waiting for news from the old sailor."

"Ha, ha, ha! Palafox, you well deserve the name of the Sea Fox, but Rudolpho, the money-lender, is your match every time," and with a chuckle, the disguised money-lender walked back to his shop at a pace one would hardly suspect from one of his seeming years.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE AMBUSH.

As night began to cast its shadows upon the dark rolling Mississippi, and the Crescent City, the hearts of many began to beat more quickly for what might it not bring to those who were so deeply interested in the scenes that darkness was soon to cover.

Colonel Brandt, in his elegant home, gave the order to his coachman to drive to the jail and hand to the keeper a letter which he gave to him.

Then the planter nervously paced the

piazza, leaving his guest, the naval commandant, to be entertained by Maud and Bradford Carr, both of whom were a trifle nervous regarding the expected meeting with the pirate chief, the man who had so wronged them both.

In his room in the inn, Captain Palafox was anxiously hoping for a visit from the one he supposed to be an old sailor, and little dreaming that the small crew, left on his beautiful schooner *Sea Fox*, had accepted a bribe to betray the vessel, and were then nervously watching for the coming of those to whom they had sold themselves.

In a state-room of the *Sea Fox* sat Rudolpho, the money-lender, certainly on the "anxious bench."

There, in their boats were Captain Mendez and his crew, well realizing their danger, while ashore, hiding away in the grove of live-oaks were the young pirate and his men, waiting, watchful and determined.

In her room at the inn, Rita, the Smuggler Queen was waiting for the appointed time, and in his cell, unacquainted with what was transpiring for and against him, was Barton Keys, the pirate, hoping, despairing, praying and cursing in one breath, as he felt what a fate had overtaken him.

True as steel to the woman he loved, Chester Granger, the smuggler lieutenant, had his carriage and men in readiness for whatever duty might devolve upon him.

Thus the darkness hid many an anxious heart.

The night had come in bleak and uncomfortable, the severe storm that threatened having swept around to the southward, and not broken in violence as many had feared and some had hoped.

Into the streets then rolled the Brandt carriage, and driving through the arched portal of the *carcel*, drew rein by one of the vaulted passageways where the keeper bade the coachman halt.

Soon, out of the dismal abode came four men, one of them heavily ironed.

But his tall form towered above the others as he walked along with difficulty.

"Where are you taking me, senor?" he asked the keeper, who just then came forward, accompanied by another person.

"Your presence is desired at Brandt Manor for some purpose, Sir Pirate, and I am sending you there under orders, though, if I had my way, you would not leave this prison until you went to the gallows," was the response of the keeper.

The pirate chief made no reply, but got into the vehicle as he was directed.

Then the three men who had led him out followed, and the keeper said:

"Get on the box with the black, Hutchins, and see that you drive straight out and back."

The man who had come up with the keeper then sprung upon the box with the negro coachman, who asked:

"All ready, massa?"

"Yes."

"Den I drives straight home, sah?"

"Yes."

Away started the vehicle, out into the streets, and along one that carried them to the avenue that ran along the river-bank, after the levee terminated.

For a short distance there were a few country homes along the river-bank, and then no more until the villa of Colonel Brandt, which was in reality a plantation, or had been, until encroached upon by the growth of the city.

Upon one side of the road were orange-trees, growing in a row in front of a Cherokee hedge, and upon the other only the levee, protecting the land and town from the river's overflow.

Ahead of them loomed up the point upon which stood half a hundred live-oak trees, and where there were seats for those who cared to stroll thither and sit on the river-bank.

As the road ran through these trees, they darkened the way greatly, and, with the rain falling, it was a dismal spot on that night.

The driver had a heavy load, and he was going at a slow pace, picking his way and, on account of the increased darkness in the trees' shadows, he drew his horses down to a walk.

Then suddenly there flashed out from the

darkness a score of shots, and a number of dark forms sprung toward the vehicle.

At the flashes of the weapons the horses bounded forward, to fall struggling in their tracks, for they had been riddled with bullets.

At the same time, without cry or moan, the negro driver and the one by his side fell headlong from the box.

Then out of the carriage-window poured a fire, when it was returned by those in ambush, and then all was silent.

Out of the vehicle the forms were dragged, the chains of the pirate chief clanking as he fell heavily upon the ground and lay in a heap.

"Come, lads, they are all done for, and you did well."

"To our boats, for we must be off!" cried a voice, and the party started rapidly over the levee, several of them delaying to search the bodies for what valuables they had on them.

"Come, I say! do you expect to get gold off a turnkey?" sternly cried the one who had before spoken, and then he added:

"We have no time to lose, if we wish to save our necks."

Entering the two boats lying against the shore the men, who had just enacted a scene so deadly, seized the oars and pulled out rapidly into the stream, soon disappearing from view.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. RITA'S COUNTERPLOT.

WHEN the darkness of night began to settle down upon the city and the river, Rudolpho, the money-lender, sought a secluded spot, enveloped in a heavy cloak, and springing into a small boat, which he had before ordered to be placed there for his convenience, rowed out upon the stream.

The money-lender was no mean oarsman, and he sent the boat at a quick pace toward the other shore, and aiming for a single light that was burning in that direction.

Soon he ran alongside of the schooner, *Sea Fox*, answering the hail of the one on deck in a satisfactory manner.

"Well, my man, I was bidden to tell you to show me quarters in a state-room where I could remain unseen," he said.

"I understand you, sir, if you are a friend of the young gentleman who came this afternoon."

"I am."

"Then this way, sir; but what about your boat?"

"Cast it adrift."

"All right, sir, you know best," and the traitor boatswain led the money-lender into a state-room forward of the schooner's large and comfortable cabin.

Returning to the deck the boatswain was met by a seaman who reported that some boats were coming down the stream.

Going rapidly forward the boatswain hailed, in a voice just loud enough to reach the ears of those whom he addressed:

"Boats ahoy!"

"Ahoy the *Fox*!" came the gruff answer.

"Who and what are you?"

"Sea Foxes," was the response.

"Ay, ay, sir, come alongside!"

A moment after four boats filled with men ran alongside of the schooner, and quickly the craft had a crew.

Captain Mendez was at the head of the party, and walked aft with the boatswain, to whom he said:

"Any firing heard over on the city shore, sir?"

"No, sir."

"All ready to sail?"

"The schooner is all stored and ammunitioned, sir, and hangs by a light mud-hook only, while sail can be set in a few minutes."

"All right; have her ready to fly at a second's notice, for we have a stiff breeze, and the night is black enough to avoid being seen— Ha! see those flashes! and hear those shots!"

"My boy is at work yonder, and will be aboard immediately."

"Come, get sail on the craft at once!"

The order was quickly obeyed, and soon after two boats came dashing across the river in the darkness and the storm.

"It is my boy and his men," said Captain Mendez, and then aloud he hailed:

"Ho, those boats!"

"Ay, ay, Captain Mendez," came the answer in the voice of Carlos Mendez.

"Bravo! now all is ready."

"Raise that hook now, and we'll be off," and a moment after, as the two boats touched the side, the light anchor left the bottom, and the *Sea Fox* swung around and darted down the river, while upon the city shore was heard by those on her decks the rapid rumble of carriage-wheels.

In the mean time, during these successful movements of the pirates, in the ambush of the Brandt carriage, and the cutting out of the schooner, the Smuggler Queen had not been idle.

As soon as it grew dark she went down to the vehicle, in which waited Chester Granger and his men, and entering it, bade the driver go slowly along the street leading to the jail.

As the vehicle got near that dismal abode of sin, those within saw a carriage enter the portal, and Chester Granger said:

"It is the Brandt carriage, for I recognize it by the swinging lamp in the arch."

"Then order our men to drive us down to the levee avenue and wait."

The vehicle again rolled on, and soon halted in an out-of-the-way spot, but where a view of the avenue leading to the Brandt villa could be seen.

In half an hour after Chester Granger, who had sprung out and was watching the drive, returned and reported that the Brandt carriage had passed.

"Then follow quickly," said the Smuggler Queen, and then she added:

"All may be well; but if there is any foul play intended by any one, we will be on hand to thwart it— Ha! what is that?"

Chester Granger sprung out of the vehicle, to find that in backing out of the place into which he had driven, the driver had broken one of the breast-straps, for the mud was deep.

It took some minutes to repair this damage, and the Smuggler Queen was nearly wild with impatience.

But, the damage repaired, the driver drove rapidly on.

But he had not gone a dozen lengths of the vehicle, when the rattle of shots was heard.

"Drive! for your life, drive!" shouted the Smuggler Queen.

But just there the road was rough, the mud deep, and it was some minutes before the driver drew rein in the live-oak grove.

"Then, what a scene met the eyes of those who sprung from the vehicle!"

There lay the horses, dead, and hitched to the carriage.

Upon them had fallen the negro guide and guard, and upon either side of the open door were two prostrate forms.

"Dead! dead!" shrieked Rita, the Lady Captain, and she threw herself upon the body of the chained pirate.

"No! he is not dead! he lives!"

"Quick! place him in the carriage, and we'll drive back to the city, for those devils have gone, and there has been vile treachery here!" and the voice of the Smuggler Queen was hoarse with passion.

"No; I am not dead! the bullet glanced on my head here, and stunned me."

It was Barton Keys, the pirate, who spoke, and Rita threw her arms about him, while she cried:

"Saved! saved! Holy Virgin, I thank thee!"

"Yes, I am saved; but there was treachery, Rita, for we were fired upon without mercy, and your friends betrayed you, or tried to by killing me, if, as I believe, you laid this plot for my escape," said Barton Keys.

"I did, and, in spite of those I bribed to aid me, you are free."

"But we must away. Quick, my man, drive back to the city, and do you know the Red Anchor Inn?"

"I do," answered the amazed coachman.

"Stop there and—"

"But why, Rita?" urged the chief.

"I will leave you there, and come rapidly on after in another carriage, for I intend to put the *Sea Fox* on the track of yonder traitors."

"Palafox?"

"Yes, for he stops at the Red Anchor."

"You drive on to the lake with Granger and the others, and I will follow."

"But he will know you."

"Oh, no, not in this disguise; but you go on, and, by the time you get sail on the lugger and the anchor up I will be there."

"Here, my man, is a cool half-thousand for you, so do your duty."

Away the carriage started, bumping, rocking, jolting, but yet not breaking, and into the city it dashed and drew up at the Red Anchor inn.

"Here is the place."

Out sprung the Smuggler Queen, and the carriage dashed on, taking the road out by the old canal—to the lake-road, while Rita boldly entered the Red Anchor Inn and asked to see Captain Palafox.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CHASE.

CAPTAIN PALAFOX was pacing his room at the Red Anchor with some impatience.

He felt worried, for he had taken the deepest interest in Irving Brandt and Maud, and was constantly dreading that their enemies would bring some calamity upon them.

Presently a knock came upon his door.

He was expecting no visitor, and so thought that it must be the old sailor, come with news for him.

In obedience to his call to come in, there entered the Smuggler Queen, in her disguise as a sailor.

"Ah! my lad, have you gotten into the wrong port?" asked Palafox, pleasantly.

"Oh no, sir, for I came to see Captain Palafox."

"I am the one you are after, then."

"I came to tell you that, as I was crossing the river a while since in my boat, and coming from visiting a messmate's mother who lives on the yon shore, I saw a number of boats row alongside of your schooner."

"Hal do you mean this?" excitedly cried Palafox.

"Yes, sir; and she swung off quietly from her anchor, set sail, and started down the river under a cloud of canvas."

"Great God! can the craft have been seized?" cried the captain, hastily putting on his storm-suit.

"It looked to me, sir, as though she had been cut out by pirates, it was all done so quiet."

"By Heaven, but it may be so."

"You have done me good service, my lad, and you shall have service, if you wish it, with me."

"I do wish it, sir."

"Then come with me, and I—"

"Can I not join you somewhere, sir, for I must let my mother know I am going?"

"That is a good lad—ever be true to your mother and you will prosper."

"Yes, come to the navy quarters with all dispatch, and lose no time, for I shall throw on board of the schooner, Sea Ghoul, every man I can find there, and go at once in chase."

"I'll be with you, sir, in less than an hour."

"Do so, lad, for in that time I'll be off."

"And here, leave this with your mother while you are gone," and the generous sailor thrust a small purse of gold into the hand of the disguised woman, and then the two left the inn, the Smuggler Queen to hasten after a vehicle to convey her out to the lake, and Palafox to make all speed down to the navy quarters.

In the mean time, the Sea Fox was heading her way down the river under a stiff breeze.

She had passed the Sea Ghoul at anchor, but not unseen, as all on board had hoped, for the officer in charge had noted her clouds of sail, and trim look, even in the darkness, and, though not recognizing her, had felt that something was wrong, and so sent report to his superior ashore.

He in turn went to report to the commandant, to find that officer away, and so nothing could be done, and the Sea Fox disappeared in the distance.

Shortly after, however, a vehicle dashed up to the stucco wall, and answering the challenge of the sentinel on duty, a man sprung out and entered the yard.

To his query as to where he could find the commandant, came the reply:

"He is away, sir, dining with Colonel Brandt."

"That is too bad; but I must see the officer in command," and Captain Palafox entered the quarters of that person to find him discussing with several others the affair of the strange vessel that had just gone down the river.

"It was my schooner, sir, for I was told she had been boarded, and rowing out to her anchorage I found her gone."

"I must at once start in pursuit," said Captain Palafox.

"You will have to await the return of the commandant, I am sorry to say," said the officer.

"I will at once seek him then; but, as it will be a foregone conclusion that I can take the schooner, please have her manned and gotten ready, so I can start at once on my return."

"I will do that, sir; and only wish I had the power to allow you to go now."

The impatient captain was already off, and his driver, under a golden souvenir, was dashing along toward the Brandt villa at the full speed of his horses.

Suddenly the vehicle swerved badly, and then came to a sudden stop.

Springing out, Captain Palafox found the horses frightened, and the driver alarmed at what they beheld in the road.

"It is the Brandt carriage, and the coachman and others dead."

"There has been red work here, and some strange mystery to clear up."

Along the road the vehicle again dashed, and up to the door of the villa, when Colonel Brandt, the naval commandant, and the others present heard what had occurred.

Instantly all was excitement, and springing into the carriage with Captain Palafox, the commandant drove rapidly back to the town.

A halt at the jail told the story of the pirate chief's escape, and dashing on to the navy quarters, the commandant bade Captain Palafox to take command of the Sea Ghoul and start in chase.

With what officers and crew he could pick up the Sea Fox set sail, and the beautiful schooner went flying down the river under a tremendous pressure of canvas, and several hours astern of the nimble-keeled craft she was in pursuit of.

But Captain Palafox was determined that the Sea Fox should never escape him, and those who had cut her out should meet full punishment, while, believing that Barton Keys was aboard, he made up his mind in case of capturing the schooner that he would string him up at once, and stand no more chances of his escaping.

Calling his officers about him, he told them to get the men at the guns, and in spite of the darkness and rain he began to drill them, for he knew that he had a fresh crew, many of them hardy seamen, and very few of them having been in close quarters at sea.

For hours he kept this drill up, until he began to feel that he would have a chance of making a good fight.

When, with the daylight the schooner ran out into the Gulf, the lookout sung out in stirring tones:

"Sail ho!"

"I see her; it is my beautiful Sea Fox, and fleet as she is she will have a bloodhound on her track."

"Crowd on the cloth, lads, for yonder craft is our game, and we must run her down."

The words of their captain, and his ringing voice thrilled the crew, and they answered with a cheer, as their swift craft went bounding along over the rough waters of the Gulf, in hot pursuit of the daring pirate who had so cleverly cut the Sea Fox out from her anchorage.

CHAPTER XL.

THE MONEY-LENDER'S BOLD GAME.

HIDING away in his state-room on the Sea Fox, the money-lender heard all of the movements overhead, felt the schooner swing around from her anchorage, and lie well over as she caught the breeze and darted down the river.

Now Don Rudolpho was a most careful man.

He never allowed himself to be seen in any

underhand work, except by the leaders in the affair, and he had no idea of permitting the men on that vessel to know his face and afterward recognize him as Don Rudolpho, the money-lender.

Hence he kept close to his state-room.

He believed that Rita, the Smuggler Queen, was on board, and Carlos Mendez had come down and told him hastily in a whisper that the pirate chief, Barton Keys, had been killed.

The next day it would be time enough to have an interview with Rita, and get Captain Mendez to land them on a certain island, where already he had ordered a lugger to come for them.

Once he could have Rita know that her husband was dead, and that he, Rudolpho, loved her more than all else in the world, he believed that he could win her affection wholly for himself.

As for his presence on board, he intended that Mendez should let it be known to the crew that he had been seized and brought for ransom, and therefore he had with him manacles to clasp upon his wrists and ankles, if needed to carry out the idea fully.

With a satisfied conscience he turned in for the night, and did not awake the following morning until he heard a voice cry out loudly and excitedly:

"It is the Sea Ghoul, by Heaven!"

"And she is in chase!"

Quickly he sprung out of his bunk and rapidly dressed himself.

He knew that the schooner was at sea, for he felt her bounding over the waves.

He heard the rapid movement of feet on deck, and he knew that the men were crowding on all sail.

Then he heard the distant boom of a cannon.

"Great God! the Sea Ghoul is in chase, and has crept upon us during the night."

"Now to see Mendez," and the money-lender stepped out of the state-room directly into the cabin.

Going cautiously to the stern ports, he beheld the Sea Ghoul rushing on under a tremendous pressure of canvas.

The Sea Fox was also staggering under the loads she was carrying, yet the pursuer was gaining upon the pursued—he saw that plainly.

Then he crept up the companionway and peeped out.

The Sea Fox was fairly flying and carrying all she could stand under.

Two men were at the wheel, and the remainder of the crew were at quarters.

Old Mendez stood watching the chase and seemed anxious, and just then his son joined him.

A whistle attracted the attention of the younger man, and he came hastily into the cabin.

"Well?" asked the money-lender.

"It is not well, for the Sea Ghoul is following us, and she is being handled so splendidly that she is gaining rapidly."

"You will have to beat her off."

"If we can, yes."

"She is in good range now."

"Yes: but seems to prefer to board us."

"Why do you not fire from your stern guns upon her?"

"We intend to, as soon as she comes near enough to make our aim certain; but in this rough sea it would be useless at this distance."

"And the lady?"

"She is not on board."

"What?"

"I asked the boatswain about her, and he says she did not come out to the vessel."

"She was dressed as a sailor-lad."

"True; but she did not come."

"Great God! can this be so?" and the money-lender rushed through the cabin, examining the state-rooms.

Of course Rita was not to be found, and Don Rudolpho grew black with rage.

"Remember, if the Sea Ghoul takes us, I was brought off for ransom!" he cried.

Carlos Mendez smiled, and answered:

"And you escape while we are hanged?"

"If I escape I can get you out of prison."

"I doubt it; but I must go on deck," and the young pirate left the cabin.

Don Rudolpho was in despair.

His plot had miscarried. The Smuggler Queen had not come on board.

He had placed his neck in a noose, and it looked as if his end was near.

Just then the Sea Ghoul began to fire from her bow guns, and she fired well, for Palafox himself aimed the pieces.

The balls flew through the rigging, doing damage here and there.

Another fire cut down several of the crew.

"Great Heaven! this will never do!"

"I must save myself— Ha! I have it!"

With this the money-lender rushed into his state-room.

In a few moments he came out with manacles upon his wrists and ankles, and chains connecting them. In his hands he held two pistols.

Creeping back to the companionway, he looked out again.

All was excitement on deck, for the fire from the Sea Ghoul was doing damage to the Sea Fox and her crew.

The Sea Fox was also now returning the fire, but one of the stern guns had been dismounted, and she was firing weakly.

"I will kill them."

"Then the crew will surrender, and the schooner be taken, and, found in irons, my story can soon be told, and I will escape."

He fairly hissed the words, and his mind was made up to some deadly work, as his face plainly showed.

There he stood, with a pistol in either hand, watching and waiting.

"I will fire when the next shots from the Sea Ghoul strike the schooner," he muttered.

A moment after came the roar of the Sea Fox's guns, followed instantly by the crash of the Sea Ghoul's bow chains, and the crash of the iron and shrieks of the wounded.

In the noise and confusion that followed no one heard the two little pistol-cracks; but they beheld first the old chief Mendez, and then the younger one fall dead.

A yell burst from the crew, who believed that they had fallen from the fire of the Sea Ghoul, and without leaders, they quickly let the schooner run up into the wind and lay to, in token of surrender.

Half an hour after Captain Palafox boarded his captured vessel, his face beaming with triumph, and gazed upon the havoc his fire had made.

Entering the cabin he found Don Rudolpho, the money-lender, in irons, and was told how he had been seized by Mendez and brought off for ransom.

Instantly he was released, while the crew were put in irons, and, having escaped by his clever trick and double murder, Rudolpho, the money-lender, returned to the city as a hero, to find that Barton Keys had escaped, and that the Smuggler Queen had mysteriously disappeared also.

But his escape made him jubilant, and he muttered savagely, as he sat alone in his sanctum once more:

"She shall not escape me—I vow it!"

CHAPTER XLI.

WHAT THE WITCH OF THE ISLE DISCOVERED.

AFTER having so long left my reader in suspense regarding the happenings upon Witches' Island, I must now return to the scene that was to be enacted before the eyes of the strange creature who called herself the Mother Witch.

We left Perdido, the mutineer, and our hero, Irving Brandt, the Planter Midshipman, facing each other at ten paces, and the giant guard about to place in their hands the weapons that were to terminate the life of one or both of them.

The old Witch sat in her chair of human bones, smiling grimly at the duelists.

To her a life was of little consequence, and she rather reveled in the scene that would bring forth bloodshed; in fact, she seemed almost as eager for the result as were the whining hounds, who were impatient at the delay of their expected repast.

English, the giant guard, seemed indifferent.

He showed no interest in the affair even, though he did slightly press the hand of Irving, as he handed him his weapon, and say softly:

"Fire quickly, boy, and kill him."

"As for the mutineer, he was very pale."

He had not recovered from his defeat, and the tax upon him, and he had doubt as to how the duel would end.

He feared Irving might be as true as a shot as he was skillful as a swordsman.

Had he dared, he would have taken some advantage; but the stern order of the old Witch to the giant guard, to kill the one who fired before the word, checked that intention, and he knew that he must take his chances.

"Senors, are you ready?"

The Witch uttered the words in a harsh voice, and the bloodhounds, in anticipation of what was coming, set up a dismal howl in chorus.

"I am always ready," was the midshipman's cool rejoinder, while Perdido said, sternly:

"Yes, ready!"

"You are to fire only at the word *fire*, and I shall count three before I utter it," again said the Witch, and again the hounds howled impatiently.

"Be ready, English."

"Yes, Mother Witch."

"Shoot down the one who fires before the word."

"Yes, Mother Witch," came in the deep tones of the guard.

Then in a still louder voice the Witch cried:

"One! two! three!—*fire!*"

With the last utterance from the woman's lips the weapons flashed almost together, though perhaps the pistol of the midshipman was fired a trifle of time the quickest.

Both bullets sped on their way, that of Perdido just clipping the shoulder of Irving Brandt, while his bullet, aimed for the heart of his foe, sent the mutineer to the earth without a moan.

"Is he dead?" calmly asked the Witch, rising from her seat and stepping toward the fallen man.

"I will see, Mother Witch; but I think that he is," remarked the giant guard, bending over the form and driving back the howling hounds.

"And you, senor?" and the Witch turned to Irving, who said, coolly:

"No, I am not hurt, though I did feel a slight twinge here on my shoulder—yes, he has drawn blood!" he continued, calmly, as he saw the stain on his sleeve.

"English will dress the wound for you, for he is as good as a surgeon."

"You are very cool under fire, and will make a valuable slave to me."

"Thank you," said Irving, coldly, and he turned away just as, in the deep tones of the giant guard, came the hurried words:

"Here, Mother Witch, is not this your emblem?"

He had stripped off the jacket and the shirt of the fallen man, and was pointing to a strange emblem pricked into the white skin, and just over the heart.

Over it hung a gold crucifix, and in this was the bullet of the midshipman's pistol imbedded, and the shock had caused the cross to indent and slightly cut the skin.

Though the man was not hurt, the bullet having been checked in its deadly flight by the crucifix, the shock had knocked him breathless, and he had fainted away.

Beneath the crucifix was the emblem that had caught the eye of the guard.

It was a perfect drawing of a raven pricked in with black India ink, the eyes being left white, the beak red, and the claws brown, the latter clutching a crimson arrow.

It certainly was an artistic piece of work, and the crucifix was of solid gold set with precious stones.

As the eyes of the woman fell upon the strange emblem, there burst from her lips a cry that seemed to come from her inmost soul, and which sent the bloodhounds howling in terror up the ravine.

"God above! that is the emblem!"

"That man is my son!"

English started to his feet as the old Witch threw herself down upon the prostrate form, gazed an instant at the face, and then pressed her lips to those of the mutineer, while she murmured, softly:

"Yes, he is my poor boy."

"Do you mean it, Mother Witch?" asked the giant.

"Man, do I not know that which I see?"

"Behold the emblem! that I pricked into his soft flesh long years ago, when he was a mere babe in my arms."

"I did it to save his life."

"Then I was a prisoner in an island far away, and among a barbarous people."

"Our ship was wrecked there, and my husband, my child and myself were made captives."

"See! they tattooed me as you see me now, and I became their Queen."

"My husband cruelly deserted me and my child, and left us among those wretches."

"To save my boy from being disfigured I thus tattooed him, and told them they were sacred marks, and they spared him."

"One day, when he was but ten years old, a vessel landed, and they fired upon the natives, and my boy was wounded and captured by them, and sailed away, leaving me all alone."

"Years after, I made my escape in a vessel that touched for water, and that fated craft was wrecked on this island, and here I have been ever since, growing rich on the booty that comes ashore on nights of storm."

"Now that boy, my child, has been cast here, and I well nigh had seen him die before my eyes."

"But he moves; tell me, English, is he much hurt?"

"No; he has merely swooned."

"Thank God! see! he wears the cross I put about his neck when he was a little infant."

"Ah, yes; he is *my child, my child!*" and the old woman, grown old beyond her time, bowed her head and wept, the first tears she had shed for many a long year.

"Mother Witch, he revives; will you tell him?"

"Yes, English; I will tell him all."

"But first take yonder boy, who so nearly became the murderer of my son, back to his prison den, and guard him well."

"My child shall live, and yonder boy must die," said the woman, her hatred suddenly turning against poor Irving.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE DOOM.

IRVING BRANDT, as the reader has seen, was not one to despair; but he certainly felt his spirits rush down to zero when he was led back by the huge Englishman to his den or cave.

Four of the most savage of the bloodhounds, instead of two, were called along by English to serve as keepers, and they looked full of rage at the turn in the tide of affairs, which had been setting toward a meal for them.

As he walked by the side of the giant, the heavy hand of the latter resting upon his shoulder, Irving said:

"Well, that is a great to do, for the old Witch to find her son."

"Yes, it is remarkable."

"Do you believe it?"

"That it is her son?"

"Yes."

"Certainly, I think there can be no doubt of it."

"Yes, it looks as though he was the long-lost lamb, and, judging by the old lady, I guess he's her boy, for like mother, like son, you know."

"Yes."

"Now I'd like to see the father turn up."

"You couldn't pose as the old man, could you?"

The giant frowned, for he saw that the midshipman was making fun of him.

"Now what do you think the old lady will do with me?"

"Kill you."

"Whew!"

"You may as well prepare to die."

"How will she kill me?"

"Set the dogs on you, I guess, to enjoy a chase over the island."

"I'll be stubborn and won't run to please her."

"Then you will have to stand and be torn to pieces."

"And you will see this done?"

"How can I help you?"

"Help me away from the island, and go with me."

"No, I have a mission to perform here."

"And then?"

"Then I shall leave," was the stern response of the giant, as he ushered the midshipman into his den and called the hounds to take their places and guard him.

Left alone with his own thoughts, Irving found them anything but pleasant.

He sat down and tried to concoct some scheme by which he could escape.

The four dogs at the entrance to the cave were not any one of them kindly-looking, and they eyed him as though they deemed him the sole cause of having cheated them out of a meal.

"You needn't eye me so viciously, you accursed brutes, for I did the best I could for you," said Irving.

"You certainly wouldn't wish to eat the old lady's son and heir, would you?" he continued, his spirits rising from their first fall to zero.

"If you'd only let me get away from here, I'd take you with me, and make respectable dogs out of you.

"But you won't, I can see that plainly, so I'll have to act without you."

In his cell he could find nothing to aid him. Had there been but one dog he would have taken his chances in a struggle.

But with four there, and half a score more to come at the first yelp, he knew it would cause him to die a fearful death.

Thus he sat for a long time considering, plotting and wondering.

At last the giant guard arrived with his supper.

"Ah! I am glad to see you.

"What news of the tattooed boy?" he asked, in his light-hearted way.

"He has recovered."

"Oh! gotten over his scare then?"

"Yes."

"And does he recognize his long-lost mother?"

"Yes, they have talked together of the past."

"And both are convinced that they are mother and son?"

"Yes."

"What a blessed thought for both of them, that the one should have such a son, the other such a mother."

"You are inclined to be bitter."

"Oh, no, I was just thinking how odd it was, and that the Lady Hag should let me go for finding her boy for her."

"You?"

"Yes, for he'd have been killed but for me, and but for me he would have been thrown to the dogs, while my bullet caused you to look up the wound, and you discovered the crow—"

"The raven."

"Well it's the same thing; you would never have known he carried a raven on his bosom but for me, so let me go, won't you?"

"I cannot."

"Suggest it to the old lady."

"She has already decided what to do with you."

"What?"

"You are to be taken to the hills above, given a start of the hounds, and then run for your life."

"There is no tree you can reach, no place of safety, for a cliff runs on three sides of the spot chosen, and the start will be made from the fourth side."

"This is a fearful death to die."

"Yes, but I cannot help you, and if I were in your place I would not run, but quickly end my anguish."

"It is good advice; but is there no place I can find safety from the ravenous brutes?"

"None."

"No tree?"

"On the cliff there is the stump of an old tree, but it will afford you no aid."

"What is the height of the cliff?"

"About forty feet."

"I could jump off."

"Yes, to your death."

"Better die that way than have my life torn out by the cruel fangs of the bloodhounds."

"True."

"Has the Witch no mercy?"

"None, for her life among the savages made her callous."

"Have you no mercy?"

"Yes, but I dare not show it."

"Why?"

"It would destroy my own plans."

"Ah, I see."

"Well, how far am I to be given a start ahead of the hounds?"

"A couple of cables' length."
"And how far to the cliff?"
"Half a dozen cables' length."
"Well, this looks as though it would end me!"

"It certainly does, and I advise you to get ready for it."

"I will, by eating a good supper," was the cool reply, and the midshipman ate with a relish that astounded the giant guard under the circumstances.

After throwing the scraps to the dogs, Irving said:

"Did that mutineer ask that my life should be saved, because I was good enough not to run him through?"

"On the contrary he urged that you should die, and suggested the race for life with the bloodhounds."

"Why, he is indeed a fit son of such a mother."

"Now leave me," and the doomed midshipman turned away and began to pace his den, when suddenly, as the last rays of the sunlight fell into the cavern, his eyes rested upon some object, which, with a glad cry, he sprang forward and seized with a tight grip.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AWAITING THE END.

It may be readily imagined that Irving Brandt did not rest well that night, with the terrible doom hanging over him that he was threatened with.

He saw the sun sink to rest, and gazed upon it with a look that was touching in the extreme.

He heard the hoot of the owls, as they awoke for a night's carousal, and the huge bird that had roosted on the skull in his den flapped its wings and flew out to join its mates.

The dismal croak of the raven down the ravine, the howling of the bloodhounds, the wash of the surf, and the sighing of the pines, all made most dismal music for him.

The four brute watchmen at his cave laid themselves down to rest, and doubtless sleep; but it was a sleep that awoke at the slightest movement of the prisoner.

They evidently did not intend that he should disappoint them on the morrow.

Thus the hours stole on, and lying upon his ghastly cot, the poor boy tried to drown his sorrows in sleep.

But sleep would not come to him.

For long hours he thought, tossed, arose, lay down again, and at last, utterly wearied out, fell into a deep sleep.

It was nearly dawn then, and the giant guard coming with his breakfast when the sun was an hour high, found him still sleeping.

He was about to retire, for the man seemed to have some heart, when Irving awoke with a start.

"Ah! I thought the hounds had me," he said, with a smile.

"Not yet; it is only me with your breakfast."

"Yes, but you are as merciless as the bloodhounds will be; but I'll not blame you, for you have brought me a good breakfast."

"Yes, I felt that you would need it."

"What time does the race come off?" asked Irving with a most nonchalant manner, as he took up a piece of fish to eat.

"Late this afternoon."

"Then I have the day before me?"

"Yes."

"You don't wish to make a cool ten thousand in gold, do you?"

"How?"

"Taking me off of the island."

"I do not care to leave it."

"Not for that sum?"

"No; ten times that sum would not tempt me."

"Ah! I see you are not for sale; but would you not tell me where I could find a boat, and just call off your dogs?"

"There are but two boats on the island that can stand a sea-way, and you would have to go by the Witch's cavern to reach either one of them—so, you see, if I was disposed to aid you, I could not."

"So I see, and I'll give up asking; but how is the Lady Witch this morning? and her darling boy is well, I hope?"

"Oh, yes; and happy at being reunited."

"Doubtless; and he'll become the Wizard of the Isle now, I guess?"

"I do not know."

"Well, you are all a scary lot, I can tell you, to look at; but once I got free from here, I'd return with a crew that would make it interesting for the inhabitants of this accursed island, witches, wizards, you, bloodhounds, crows, owls and all."

"I do not doubt it; but you'll not get away though."

"That is just what troubles me, drives sleep from me, as you discovered when you came here a while since, and takes away my appetite," and the midshipman very coolly helped himself to another fish and hoe-cake.

"Well, boy, you have more pluck than I ever saw even a man possess; but it will do you no good, and I am sorry for you."

"Keep your pity, big man, for I can live without it."

"Here, take the remains, and I'll give the dogs the bones," and Irving arose from his meal.

"What time will I see you again?" he asked, as the giant turned away.

"I'll bring you your dinner at noon."

"Thank you," and Irving walked back into the cave and picked up a coil of rope.

It was the same object his eyes had fallen upon the evening before, and which he had seized so eagerly.

"Well, I'd like to hang you four brutes, and if I could get you in here one at a time, I'd do it," he muttered.

Then he tried to coax the bloodhounds to enter the cave; but they saw that he did not have anything for them to eat, and only growled in response to his persuasive words.

Thus the morning passed and again the giant guard appeared, and bearing the youth's dinner which, like his breakfast, consisted of fish, hoe cake and coffee.

Irving ate with a relish, however, and again questioned the guard in his light-hearted way.

"Well, has the old Lady Witch relented?"

"Oh, no."

"Still determined to have the chase?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"She always walks over the island before sunset, and it will be then."

"Are you going to set all the dogs on me?"

"Yes."

"It will be a lively race if I run, for I am pretty fleet on foot."

"Run or not run, it can end but one way for you."

"Yes; well, you'll be there?"

"I will come for you when the Witch gives the order."

"Don't let the tattooed child miss it."

"He'll be there; but, boy, have you any chance of escape, for I cannot believe you could thus talk lightly in face of such a doom?"

"You say there is no hope for me, so what hope can I have?"

"The cavern has no arms in it, and I am at your mercy," was the low reply of the midshipman, and the giant guard departed, leaving him again alone.

But a few hours after he returned and said:

"Come, boy, for the hour of your doom is at hand."

Without a word the brave midshipman arose and followed him from the cave, and together they walked down the ravine toward the cavern of the Witch, the hounds trotting close at their heels.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE START AND PURSUIT.

He's been promoted," was the cool remark of the Planter Midshipman, as he came in sight of the death cavern, and beheld the old Witch seated in her hideous chair, and in another scarcely less so, and by her side, the son who had so nearly lost his life through his mother's order and love of cruelty.

"Yes, she has taken him to her heart in earnest," answered the giant.

"She'll want to kill you next."

"Oh, no, for I am useful, and he never will be," was the response, and the two now halted before the cavern, every hound on the island now at their heels, for they had begun

to feel that something of importance was on hand in which they had a deep interest.

"Well, sir, as my son cannot die by his mother's hand, you will have to," said the Witch, sternly, addressing Irving, who asked indifferently:

"Do you intend to kill me?"

"No, I would not stain my hands with your blood, whatever might fall on my soul.

"But the law here is that but three human beings can dwell on this island together.

"You make the fourth, and the laws of witchcraft cannot be broken."

"Let us gamble, that is, play a game of cards, to see who shall die," boldly suggested Irving, but with no idea of his suggestion being accepted.

"No, my word is law here above all chance.

"You will have to die."

"How?"

"I intend to have some sport with you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes."

"How, may I ask?"

"I shall go to the plateau in the island, almost wholly surrounded by the sea cliff.

"There you shall be set free, and the hounds will be put on your trail."

At this the hounds gave a yelp of joy in chorus, for it would not be the first time that they had run a human being to death on that same race-ground for the pleasure of the old Witch.

"And do you allow this, sir?" and Irving turned to Perdido, who had sat pale and silent through all, but with a certain smile of cruelty upon his face that showed he had not forgotten his early training among the savages, where all kinds of barbarities were committed upon prisoners.

"Yes, I have nothing to say," was the calm response.

"And yet I saved your life yesterday."

"Oh, that was from no love of me."

"Understand me," said Irving, hotly; "I do not beg for my life, but I merely wished to see how you felt as regards the fate I was to suffer."

"What my mother decides, I agree with."

"All right; I am ready, old Witch, but tell me, what start of the hounds do you intend to give me?"

"A couple of cable-lengths."

"Why not give me more, so as to lengthen out your sport, for they will run me down too quickly at that."

"You shall have more."

"Thank you; now I am ready for the run."

The old Witch and the two men gazed upon him with undisguised admiration.

There was no disguising the fact that he was utterly fearless.

But his noble courage raised no pity in their hearts, and the old Witch arose and led the way to the scene of the race.

By her side walked her wicked son, and the giant guard and his prisoner came next, with the bloodhounds frisking about in the rear, ahead, and on all sides.

Irving's cool eyes noted one thing, that the condition of the hounds was very fat, and they evidently took little exercise, but lay about lazily day and night.

Had they been gaunt and in good hunting condition they could readily make double the speed they could in their present state.

"This is in my favor," he muttered and he continued to watch the dogs, whose playful antics, in anticipation, soon tired them, as he could see.

Arriving at the slope leading to the plateau, or rather vale, for such it was, rising on three sides toward the sea, they all halted.

Here and there was a slight mound, a small stunted pine, but affording no shelter, and far on the other side stood the lightning-riven trunk of a tree, which the giant guard had spoken of.

Beyond it were the blue waters of the Gulf, but not visible.

The dogs were now held in leash, and the giant took hold of the young prisoner.

"Let your tattooed boy escort me to the

starting-point," quietly asked Irving of the old Witch.

At the request her eyes flashed, as she answered:

"And have the hounds, who do not know him yet, spring upon him?"

"Yes, he would make equally as good a meal as I," was the impudent rejoinder.

"Go! and, English, give him a start of but half-way."

"Yes, Mother Witch."

Without a word Irving walked off with the prisoner, while the Witch and Perdido held the hounds.

"Do you see yonder stump?" asked English, halting.

"Yes."

"That is your starting-point, so when you get there the hounds will be let go."

"Why not go there with me?"

"Because, in their blind rage, they would tear me in pieces when they came up with me.

"But do not run to the stump, or they will be set loose at once.

"Go slowly, and when you are ready, raise your hand and bound away.

"I wish you success in reaching the cliff, and if you take my advice, you will spring off and kill yourself, rather than die by the fangs of those brutes.

"Now good-by."

"Good-by," was the unquivering response of the brave youth, and the giant guard turned back, while Irving calmly walked on to the stump.

Arriving there he saw that the giant guard had reached the place where stood the old Witch, Perdido, and the hounds, the latter wild with impatience.

Irving saw that he was just half-way across the plateau, and said grimly:

"I believe I can make it."

Then he raised his hands, and with a bound darted forward like a deer.

With one yelp the hounds started and the chase was begun, the brutes, after the start, running as silently as did the flying fugitive.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE ESCAPE.

It would scarcely be believed that human feet could cover the ground with the fleetness that Irving Brandt, the Planter Middy, ran after he made the spring away on his race for life.

He had always practiced all kinds of athletic feats, and had often walked and ran for hours along the beach, when a boy, to see what he could endure, while he also rowed about the waters with the same untiring energy, and now it was to stand him in good stead.

Glancing back as he sped along, he saw the pack of bloodhounds rushing on, their noses close to the ground following the scent, their tongues hanging out, and straining every muscle in the hard run after the fugitive.

He saw the Witch, Perdido, and the giant guard standing where he had left them, gazing on with the deepest interest.

Then also he saw that the hounds were gaining, yet slowly.

With renewed exertion he turned to the work before him.

Throwing open his jacket he began to unwind as he ran a coil of rope that was closely wrapped around his body.

Gathering the coil in one hand, as he unwound it, he soon had it ready for the use he intended to put it to.

One end had a slip-knot like the noose of a lariat in it, and this he carried ready in one hand.

He had now passed over half the distance to the cliff, and the hounds had gained about one-third on him.

"I shall reach it," he hissed through his set teeth.

But he did not relax his exertions, and sped on with the same deer-like speed.

On, on, he fairly flew, and on, on, the bloodhounds came in chase, steadily gaining in the race for life.

Before him, in a straight line, was the stump of the shattered pine, and for that he was aiming.

Nearer and nearer he drew to it, ascending the slight incline without seeming effort, though every movement was telling upon

him, so fleet was he flying, so great the exertion he was making.

Had the old Witch suspected that man could run as he did, never would she have given him such a start ahead of her fat, sleek hounds.

But he had it, and he intended to make the best of it.

On, on, he flew.

On, on, the bloodhounds rushed in pursuit. Nearer and nearer to the pine trunk he drew.

Nearer and nearer to the fugitive drew the hounds.

At last the trunk was but a few paces distant, and fifty paces behind came the hounds.

A bound more and the stump was reached, the noose was thrown around it, the other end of the rope was tossed over the cliff, but three feet distant, and over the side went the daring midshipman, sliding out of the reach of the bloodthirsty brutes just as they dashed up, breathing hotly in his face.

One, two, unable to check their career, went headlong over the cliff, and fell with a thud below, even before the brave midshipman slid down upon the rope, while their fellow-brutes stood howling furiously above.

"Ha! Death and Fangs, you should have drawn up, but you are done for," panted Irving, as the two hounds writhed with their broken bones.

There, not far away, was the little cove into which had sailed the coffin boat that night.

There, as he had hoped, were two little vessels at anchor.

One of them was the coffin-craft, the other a stanch craft, such as were used by fishermen on the Gulf coast.

Then there were several boats lying on the shore.

To his great chagrin Irving saw that the sails of the smack were not bent on, but lay bleaching on the sands.

He had, therefore, the choice of taking a skiff or the coffin-craft.

If the former, he would be followed in the coffin-craft and captured.

If the latter, he stood a chance of escape.

Instantly he rushed to the shore as he heard the stentorian tones of the giant guard and the shrieking voice of the old Witch, calling off the hounds, to run them around the shore, and thus head him off.

Seizing a skiff he shoved it into the water, from where it lay upon the sands, and soon sculled it out to the coffin-craft.

Quickly he raised the sail—the strange, crimson sail with its ghastly emblems, and was tugging at the anchor when around the point came the hounds.

Soon after appeared the giant guard, then Perdido, and last the old Witch, all running at their topmost speed.

But by the time the hounds reached the shore the anchor was up and the bows of the boat had swung round to the wind.

A good breeze was blowing, and seizing the helm the daring boy headed out of the little cove, leaving the hounds swimming out toward him.

"Fire on him!" shrieked the Witch, and in answer the giant guard opened with the pistols he wore in his belt, and Perdido did the same.

But though one bullet buried itself in the mast, the others fell into the sea, and the coffin-craft glided serenely on its way.

"Good-by, Lady Witch—good by, all."

"I really enjoyed the run, and you can have the rope as a *souvenir*," called out Irving, with a triumphant laugh.

"Bend those sails and go in chase!"

"He shall die!" yelled the Witch.

But the giant guard was already at work on the smack's sail, and aided by Perdido and the Witch, it did not take very long to get the little craft ready.

Then the three sprang into it, and headed out of the cove in full chase.

But the coffin-boat was now over a league ahead, sailing well, and night was beginning to cast its shadows upon the water, so that the chances lay in favor of the bold Midshipman Planter, though, of course, he was alone upon the waters in a weird boat, provisionless and frail.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A NEW PLOT.

BUT let us return to Rudolpho, the money-lender, after the utter failure of his daring

plot to kill the Sea Ghoul, and to get the Smuggler Queen into his power.

Upon returning to the city, in irons as he was, and having the story go the rounds of how he had been kidnapped by Mendez, the Rover and his daring son, for the purpose of getting a large ransom from him, Don Rudolpho became quite a hero.

But it was a heroism he did not like, and bitterly cursed his folly in having been so cleverly taken in by a woman.

Her motive he could not understand, and he was determined to yet run her to earth.

He only knew that while he had sailed on the schooner Sea Fox, believing her to be in one of the state-rooms of the vessel, and her husband to be lying dead in his irons on the river-bank, as Carlos Mendez had reported to him, he returned to the city to find that nobody in irons had been found, and that the pirate chief had escaped and his wife most mysteriously disappeared with him.

"I will find them, for I have determined to carry out my plot against Barton Keys and his bride," he said, savagely, as he sat musing over his sorrows in his sanctum.

"An old woman to see you, senor," said Bono, putting his head in the door.

"Who is she?"

"Don't know, sir; but she looks like a hard one."

"Find out what she wants."

"She wants to see you, sir, and not me, and she gave me a whack over the head with her cane," said Bono, reappearing hastily, after having interviewed the visitor.

"Show her in, then, and we'll see if she whacks me," was the response.

A moment after Bono ushered in a woman bent with age, and supporting herself upon a cane.

Her hair was snow-white, her face wrinkled; she wore large iron spectacles, and was dressed in homespun.

"You desire to see me, woman?" said the money-lender, sternly.

"Yes, if you are Don Rudolpho," she answered in a cracked voice.

"I am."

"Well, you are the one I have come to see; but I find that you do not know me, Senor Don?"

The last was spoken in a different voice, and it brought the money-lender to his feet, with:

"Great God! you are the Smuggler Queen!"

"I am."

"Ah! woman, you played me a false trick," he said, reproachfully.

"In what way, man? Did not you play me false?"

"No, I did my duty; but the young lieutenant allowed his men to fire into the carriage, and, as I believed, killed the chief."

"Then he came on board, and believing escape necessary, I put at once to sea with the vessel."

"I know, yes; but they did wound the chief, the bullet glancing upon his head, however, and stunning him only, where it might have killed him."

"I always plot double, Don Rudolpho, and so I plotted then, for if one plan went wrong, I had another to fall back upon."

"That other, when I came up and found only dead bodies, and my husband wounded and in irons among them, I did fall back upon, and I took him to the lugger, and he is now safe."

"I have heard of your gallant deeds, I have heard of your having been made a hero; but I called in to ask you to serve me and the Sea Ghoul."

"In any way that I can serve you I will, Lady Rita, as you know."

"Yes, for gold, and you shall have it, and in abundance, or what will bring it."

"Now, as I said, the Sea Ghoul is on the lugger, and is safe."

"But that is no vessel for him."

"He is a hunted man and cannot live on shore."

"He must live at sea, if it is with a halter around his neck, and I shall live with him, and be his second in command."

"You are well worthy of the position, Lady Rita."

"Oh, yes, I am a better sailor than most men, and I know it."

"My poor father trained me well, Don Rudolpho."

"But now to the point."

"Well, lady?"

"We need a vessel."

"You can get one."

"I know that we can through you."

"It will take time."

"It must not take too long."

"You see every one is on the alert now, and—"

"Nonsense; it will not be suspected that any man will cut a vessel out now."

"But what vessel?"

"There are the Sea Fox and the Sea Ghoul."

"The Sea Fox sails to-night on a cruise under her captain."

"Well, we would rather have the Sea Ghoul, for she is larger, has heavier armament, and in the last chase of the Sea Fox, now that Captain Palafox has improved upon her rig, she showed herself a faster sailer."

"But she lies at the navy dock."

"What of that?"

"And has a guard of marines on board."

"True, but no crew."

"Yes, but is expecting a crew soon, when she will go to sea."

"Well, you must furnish that crew, Rudolpho."

"Oh! I can get the men, as to that."

"Now listen to my plan."

"Yes, lady."

"It is known that Government officials in Pensacola are to send a crew for the schooner as soon as they can be spared from there."

"Yes."

"You get a vessel, ship your men on her, rig up a youth to act as a midshipman, or dress up a couple of them, and send the craft up the river and anchor at the navy dock."

"Well?"

"You are obtuse."

"I do not wish to be."

"Let your middies report to the commandant that they are sent over with the crew for the schooner, and also that a pirate craft is now in the Gulf."

"Then, my word for it your crew will be thrown on board the Sea Ghoul, naval officers will be put on her, and she will sail after that pirate."

"By Heaven! but you are a Lady Captain," cried the money-lender, with enthusiasm.

"Now you see my plot?"

"I do."

"And can carry it out?"

"I can."

"When?"

"I will go at once to work on it."

"Good!"

"And you?"

"I will sail round in the lugger and meet the schooner, when my husband will take command."

"The very thing."

"Yes, and there must be no mistake."

"There shall not be, lady."

"See to it, and if you fail this time, Don Rudolpho, I might get revengeful, for it is my nature."

"I know it, lady, and I will not fail; but you are aware, I suppose, of the excitement that the wreck of the Vulture is creating?"

"Yes, I have heard it talked of."

"As she has not put into any port, that they have heard of, the greatest dread is felt for her, and I learn that Colonel Brandt sails in his lugger yacht in search of her."

"Indeed! he'll have a fine time finding her," and with a light laugh the woman resumed her stooping gait and departed from the home of the money-lender.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A STRANGE VISITOR.

THERE was distress in the home of Colonel Brandt.

The Vulture had not been heard from since she sailed, that is, by those who were honestly interested in her safety, and Irving had been a passenger on board.

There had been several severe storms, and one of them might have sent her to the bottom, and again, she might have been blown far off her course, or, dismasted, was making her way under jury-masts to port.

She was known to have sailed light-hand-

ed; but still all felt hope that she would soon be heard from.

Still, those who loved the young midshipman could not but be filled with anxious sorrow, and yet hope for the best.

As for the colonel, he was very nervous.

He several times had been tempted to go to the gaming-table to drown his thoughts in play.

Once he had done so, and had quickly lost a thousand dollars.

All that he had left was the package of jewels left with him by the Smuggler Queen.

These he was almost tempted to risk, and might have done so, had not a stranger appeared in the Palace of Chance.

Whether the stranger had any watch on him or not, the planter did not know; but his guilty conscience led him to believe that he had, and he hastily left the *salon*.

One afternoon he had the craving to play fearfully strong upon.

"I will sail to-morrow in the lugger, and I may have luck."

"I will just pawn one of these gems, and risk the amount."

"I wonder why that woman does not return me my notes, for these jewels fairly burn my pocket," he muttered, as he strolled out upon the piazza, and thence down toward the river-gate.

As he reached it, he beheld coming toward him a woman bent with the weight of years.

She walked with a cane and it seemed hard for her to get along.

"Which way, my good woman?" he asked, kindly.

"Anywhere, everywhere, for I am a wanderer on God's green earth," was the quivering reply, as the woman sunk into a seat by the gate.

"Here is a piece of gold that may serve you well," he said.

"Are you Planter Brandt?"

"I am."

"The Gambler Planter?"

The colonel's face flushed as he said:

"I sometimes played; but not now."

"It is a good thing for you, Colonel Brandt, that you do not."

"Woman, who are you?"

"Do you remember to have played with a young sailor, one night, in the Palace of Chance, and lost heavily?"

"I do."

"And you gave him your paper, while he also held another note of yours?"

"Yes; who are you?"

"He gave you some jewels?"

"Yes."

"Have you those jewels?"

"I have."

"Where?"

"Here in my wallet."

"And I have your notes."

"You?"

"Yes, I have them here."

"Who sent you here?"

"The Smuggler Queen."

"Where is she?"

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Ask the winds."

"And the pirate chief?"

"He is with her."

"I hope never to hear of them again."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Well, you doubtless will; but where is your son?"

"He sailed weeks ago on the ship Vulture, for Mobile, and the vessel has not been heard from."

"Do you know aught of my boy?"

"You will never see him again."

"Ha! how know you this?" and the colonel grasped the woman's shoulder.

"Hands off, Rupert Brandt, for do you not see that I am old and feeble?"

"Pardon me; but tell me, pray, what you know of my poor boy?"

"Seek him at the bottom of the sea."

"Do not tell me this."

"I do tell you, for the Vulture was accursed, and went down one night of storm."

"Ha! how know you this?"

"She was doomed by a witch, and went to pieces."

"My God! can this be true?" groaned the planter.

"Here are your notes; give me the jewels of the Smuggler Queen."

She held out the papers, and the colonel sadly took the jewels from his wallet, and handed them to her.

Then he glanced about him nervously, and seeing it, the woman said:

"There are those who have watchful eyes upon me, Planter Brandt, so you need not hope to rob me and throw me into the river."

"Woman, you have what you came for, so go!" sternly answered the planter, and with a rude laugh the Smuggler Queen, so well disguised, hobbled away, leaving Colonel Brandt with a brain on fire and a heart full of sorrow.

At a pace that belied her decrepit locks, the woman walked back down the road to a small cove in the river-bank where lay a skiff, tied to a tree.

Into this she got, and seizing the oars, pulled at a steady stroke down the river.

This stroke she kept up until she ran into a dock where a farm-like looking vehicle was awaiting, a man standing near, and evidently the driver.

"Back to the lake," she said, sharply, as she took a seat on the box, and the man mounting by her side, at once started off at a rapid trot.

After an hour's drive he set her down upon the shore of Lake Borgne, and springing into a boat she rowed out to one of the many little coasters at anchor off the land.

In the craft she boarded the reader will at once recognize the lugger Sea Owl in her disguise.

A heavily-bearded man in coarse attire paced the deck, smoking a *cigarrito*, and he said, quietly:

"Back again, Rita?"

"Yes."

"What luck?"

"The money-lender will throw a crew on board the schooner at once."

"Which schooner?"

"Your old vessel."

"Good! for under her new rig, which Palafox put on her, she cannot be outsailed."

"She will sail soon, and we are to meet her on a direct course for the Balize."

"Good again! you have done well; but did you hear anything of the Brandts?"

"No," said the woman, sternly, and then continued:

"Other than that the boy was lost on the Vulture."

"When shall we sail?"

"At once."

"Ah! but what did Rudolpho say regarding my escape on the lugger?"

"Oh, he excused it by saying that the young officer who made the attack got excited and allowed his men to fire upon the carriage."

"He nearly ended my days," and the man threw his hair back, and gently touched a wound upon his forehead.

"Yes, he meant to."

"Meant to kill me?"

"Yes."

"Why should he?"

"With you out of the way, he would make love to me."

"The young officer who led the attack?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"Don Rudolpho."

The man gave a loud whistle and said:

"I see, I see; but he shall not have my little wife."

"Oh, Barton, if you would only love me, if you would only give up your desire to get rid of me, and of some day making Maud Brandt your wife, I would be so happy, and follow you to the ends of the earth, ay, to the gallows, if you went there, and die with you."

The woman spoke passionately, and the man said in response:

"Rita, I do love you, so be happy."

"And Maud Brandt?"

"I will not think of her again, Rita."

"The Virgin bless you, my dear Barton, for now I am indeed happy."

"But let Granger get sail upon the lugger and we will be off, and before a week shall go by you will again tread the deck of your beautiful schooner," and the Smuggler Queen entered the lugger's cabin.

But half an hour after as the Sea Owl was gliding swiftly over the waters she returned

to the deck and joined the pirate chief and Chester Granger, who stood near each other, but in silence, for between those two there was the deadliest hatred existing.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

DON RUDOLPHO'S SECOND SCHEME.

"WELL, I shall try again; but this time I will not be fool enough to trust myself on board any vessel."

This remark was made by the money-lender, after the departure from his sanctum of the disguised Smuggler Queen.

He was delighted to find trace of her again; but his past experience on the Sea Fox had taught him a lesson, and that was to use other hands than his own in pulling chestnuts out of the fire.

After thinking awhile Rudolpho hit upon one whom he thought he could trust with the affair, and Bono was at once dispatched for him.

That night the man came, an evil-faced yet handsome man of thirty, elegant in manners, fashionable in dress, and most thoroughly the accomplished villain.

"Monte, you are a deuced good-looking fellow," said the money-lender, after he had greeted his visitor.

"Thank you, Don, I am often told so," was the calm reply.

"You are a sailor, I know."

"Oh, yes, I served my time in the navy, until I got into a little irregularity at card-playing, and was dismissed."

"And then?"

"Oh, then I took to piracy, as you know; but preferring to live in comfort, without a halter about my neck, I gave up the sea for the life of a gambler."

"So I thought; but you are not adverse to going on a short cruise that will pay you well?"

"It will have to be big pay, Rudolpho."

"It will be."

"What am I to do?"

"You are to cut a vessel out."

"Ah!"

"Run her into the Gulf, look up a lugger that will be also searching for you, and board her."

"The captain of this lugger you are to kill; the second officer, one Chester Granger, you are to give the command of the schooner with a letter from me, and he is to turn her into a pirate."

"Well?"

"There is a lady on board the lugger."

"I see."

"And it is dangerous to send so good-looking a man as you are to become the guardian of a beautiful woman."

"Oh, no, for love is one thing, business another."

"Well, you are to take the lugger, with half a dozen of your picked crew, and run her to an island which I will direct you to."

"Yes."

"There you are to await my coming."

"How much time will all this take?"

"Less than a month."

"And my price?"

"Shall be ten thousand dollars."

"I must have double that."

"You shall."

"Half cash, the balance when the work is done."

"You shall have it."

"Where is the vessel?"

"In the river."

"And the crew?"

"I will get them for you, and you are to come up the river with them on another craft."

"Nominally, you will be a seaman, and a supposed midshipman will be in charge."

"He will report with the men as a Government crew for the schooner, Sea Ghoul, and once on board you assume command, and are master."

"All right; but when?"

"I will purchase a coaster out in the lake to-morrow, put the men on board at night, and you can run her round."

"The pretended middy will understand this?"

"Certainly."

"Then I am at your service, so pay me half down and I will be ready when you send for me."

The money was counted by Rudolpho and handed to Merte Monte, and then he said:

"I take command of the coaster upon reaching her?"

"Yes; and only after landing at the navy quarters is the middy in charge."

"I understand; good night, Don," and Captain Merte Monte, the one-time naval officer, and afterward pirate and gambler, left the sanctum of the money-lender.

Four days after he ran the coaster up the river, and a bright-faced young rascal, playing midshipman, presented his forged credentials to the commandant, and made his fictitious report of the pirate vessel in the Gulf.

Instantly the sadly needed crew were ordered on board of the schooner, a lieutenant was placed in command, half a score of marines accompanying him, and, with the two supposed middies as under officers, the Sea Ghoul Set sail for the Gulf.

But, hardly had she reached the blue water when the naval officer and marines were seized and placed in irons, and Captain Merte Monte stepped to the quarter-deck as the commander of the schooner, which had been taken without a shot or a death.

"Now to find the lugger, and my work is done," proudly said Captain Monte, as he ordered the schooner to put on a course along the coast in search of the disguised Sea Owl.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE DOUBLE CAPTURE.

"SAIL ho!"

The cry came from the lips of a man who was the lookout on a small lugger.

It brought the crew of the craft, half a dozen in number to their feet, and out of the cabin two persons that are already known to the reader, for, in spite of her disguise as a sailor boy, the Smuggler Queen is recognizable, and the tall form by her side can be none other than the pirate chief Barton Keys.

"What do you make her out, Granger?" asked the pirate chief, addressing Chester Granger, who was looking at the strange sail through his glass.

"I make her out a small boat with a leg-of-mutton sail painted red," was the reply.

"Ha! that sounds like the craft we saw off the Witches' Isle," cried Rita, the Smuggler Queen, and all three were now gazing at the strange sail through their glasses.

"If it was night, Barton, I would say fly from yonder craft, small as she is; but as it is, what will you do?"

"Run her down, Rita, if she is sailed by the old Witch herself," was the stern reply.

The lugger was now put away for the little stranger, and in half an hour's time it could be seen that the sail was bright crimson, and more, had a white skull and cross-bones upon it.

"It is the Witch's craft," said Rita.

"We will soon see, Lady Captain, when her hull rises," answered Chester Granger.

"She is flying from us," said Barton Keys, suddenly.

This was true, for the little vessel had suddenly changed her course and began to fly.

Then it was soon seen that her hull was in the shape of a coffin, and the Smuggler Queen cried:

"It is the Witch's boat."

"Now we will solve that strange mystery."

Away flew the Sea Owl in pursuit, and rapidly she began to overhaul the strange, weird craft.

In an hour more she ran close up to her, and the pirate hailed:

"Hol that Death craft!"

"Ahoy, the Sea Owl!" was the ready response.

"It is the Midshipman Planter, as I said."

"He has escaped from the island," said the Smuggler Queen, in a low voice, and her eyes sparkled with triumphant malice.

"What craft is that?" asked the pirate.

"The Witch's craft," was the cold response.

"Run alongside."

"Ay, ay! Pirate Barton Keys, I will," and ten minutes after, Irving Brandt, the Planter Middy, looking pale and haggard from want of rest and food, sprung upon the lugger's deck.

"Link that coffin, for it is too fearful to have alongside," ordered the Smuggler

Queen, as Irving walked aft, and said, in his bold way:

"Why, Barton Keys, I surely thought you had been hanged by this time."

"No, but you will soon be, and—"

"Sail ho!"

All started, and their eyes fell upon a distant sail.

Irving's face flushed and then paled as he saw it, while the pirate chief cried, glancing at the stranger through his glass:

"By Heaven! it is your lugger yacht, Lady Maud, Irving Brandt."

"So I see."

"And we will soon have your whole family our guests, with Bradford Carr, too, for I heard that your father was to sail in search of the lost Vulture, and that his daughter and her lover were to accompany him," and Barton Keys spoke with a sneer, while he in vain tried to hide the joy he felt.

"Barton, will you give chase to yonder craft?" asked the Smuggler Queen, sternly.

"Certainly, for then my revenge will end."

"He has only half a dozen negroes as a crew, while we have eight seamen, not to speak of your Indian yonder, Rita, and Granger and myself."

"I tell you I shall capture yonder yacht—see, she already flies from us."

Then the chase began in hot earnest, and the lugger was put under all sail to overhaul the yacht.

Strange to say, in spite of her smaller and tattered sails, the Sea Owl gained upon the chase, for somehow the Lady Maud did not seem to be sailing her best.

Standing on deck, Irving Brandt was watching with deep interest the result.

What could it mean that the Lady Maud seemed to be lagging so? he wondered.

Who could be sailing her?

Certainly she could beat the Sea Owl, and yet, in her disguise as a coaster, the latter was overhauling her.

"Put that boy in irons!" sternly ordered the pirate chief, and Irving found himself quickly ironed, and yet he was allowed to remain upon the deck.

Nearer and nearer the Sea Owl drew to the Lady Maud, until the negro crew, six in number, could be distinctly seen upon her decks.

At the helm stood Woods, and by his side three persons.

These, through his glass, Barton Keys recognized, and shouted gladly:

"There stands my rival and foe, Bradford Carr, and he commands the lugger."

"Then there I see Colonel Brandt and the fair Maud."

"Now, boy, I have all of your name in my power," and Barton Keys fairly hissed the last words.

A moment after the Lady Maud began to fire from her stern-guns; but her shots fell wide, and still the Sea Owl crept up, disdaining to return the fire.

Nearer and nearer, occasionally hit, but not hurt, until the Lady Maud was only a cable's length ahead.

But still she held on, and then the pirate chief called out:

"Boarders ho! follow me!"

At his words Maud was seen to go into the cabin, while Bradford Carr, Colonel Brandt, and the negro crew, all armed to the teeth, stood ready to repel boarders.

"Boarders, follow me!"

With these words the pirate chief sprang upon the deck of the Lady Maud, and the grapples were thrown, while at his back came his men.

But just then a volley of musketry came from the cabin, and half of his men went down, while suddenly there appeared upon the scene half a score of gallant seamen, whom Bradford Carr had begged the commandant of the navy quarters to allow him to take, and in an instant almost the fight had ended, the Sea Owl was a prize, and Barton Keys, disarmed by Bradford Carr, was a prisoner.

"Here, men, string that pirate up, for he shall escape no more," cried Irving Brandt, still in irons, and quickly the coil was put about the neck of the pirate, while with a shriek Rita, the Smuggler Queen, fell like one dead upon the deck.

And up into the air, cursing most savagely, Barton Keys, the Ghoul of the Sea, was

dragged, while Chester Granger and the crew were sent below in irons.

With glad hearts Irving was given a welcome, and his strange story was soon told, and then he said:

"I will take the Sea Owl and my negro crew, Mr. Carr, and head for the Witches' Island, for I have a duty to perform there, while you sail back to port in the Lady Maud."

This advice was followed, the Smuggler Queen and Chester Granger, at the request of the midshipman, being put on the Sea Owl under his charge.

Then the two vessels parted, the Lady Maud to return to her anchorage near the lake-shore, with her smuggler prisoners, and Irving Brandt, with his negro crew, and the Smuggler Queen and Chester Granger, to sail in the Sea Owl for the Witches' Island.

As for Barton Keys, the Sea Ghoul, his body had been cut down before Maud came on deck, and, weighted with shot, had sunk to the depths of the waters which he had so long sailed over under his sable flag.

CHAPTER L.

THE FATE OF THE ISLANDERS.

AFTER parting company with the Lady Maud, Irving Brandt headed for the Witches' Island.

The sufferings he had endured there made him anxious to break up that scheme of superstitious iniquity which had so long been a terror to all seamen sailing in the Gulf.

He had with him now his own crew of negroes, and he felt that he could depend upon them.

To Bradford Carr he had left the charge of the smugglers and begged that he would see the naval commandant at once upon his arrival and state why he had not sooner fulfilled his instructions, regarding his orders to proceed on the Vulture to Mobile on special service, and to tell him that he would go there as soon as he had visited the Witches' Island and made the delectable crew who dwelt there prisoners.

As for the prisoners he already held, Rita, the Smuggler Queen, and Chester Granger, he was sorely troubled what to do with them.

The Smuggler Queen had certainly proven herself a most vindictive foe of his, merciless as a two-edged sword; but his innate gallantry would not permit him to seek revenge against a woman.

To give her up to the authorities, he knew would be to imprison her perhaps for life, as her crimes deserved.

To release her, he knew also was to put her upon his track with the vengeance of a bloodhound, for now she owed to him the double grudge of her husband's death and her father's.

Since the pirate chief had been hanged, she had appeared like a woman carved out of marble, with simply the power of movement.

Her face was colorless, her eyes burned, and she moved about in a listless way, showing no emotion since she had recovered from her swoon to find her pirate husband had been hanged and thrown into the sea by the order of the Planter Midshipman.

As for Chester Granger, the young middy had always liked him, and he knew that he was naturally good, but had been led away by Barton Keys.

While a prisoner he had treated him well, and had begged the Smuggler Queen hard to spare him.

"I shall let Granger go; but what to do with the woman I cannot tell," he muttered as they neared the Witches' Island the following afternoon, after parting with the Lady Maud.

Entering the cabin, where Chester Granger was confined in irons, and the Smuggler Queen too, for Irving had feared that she would do some fearful act of violence, he said:

"Granger, I have always liked you, and I did not wish to see you hang, so I brought you with me."

"I thank you, Irving," said the man, sadly.

"Had I sent you on with the yacht, you would have been strung up; but I intend to release you as soon as we reach Mobile, where I am going after we touch at the Witches' Island, and if you need money, I

have a few hundreds for you; but for God's sake, lead a different life."

"I will try, Irving; but what about my Lady Captain?"

"Granger, had I done right, I would have had her go on to be tried, and that would have ended in life imprisonment for her."

"But I wish to let her go, and you can take her with you, when I hope she will feel that I have only done my duty, and no longer hunt me down."

"Never! never will I accept mercy at your hands, Midshipman Brandt," said Rita, hoarsely.

"What am I to do with you then?"

"Take me to New Orleans, turn me over to the naval commandant, and let me be tried and sentenced."

"I do not wish to do that."

"Well, release me, and the result be on your head, for I shall hunt to ruin your father, your sister, Bradford Carr, and all you hold dear, and then you shall in the end feel the whole weight of my vengeance."

"I tell you, Sir Midshipman, I will be merciless, so if you hold love for those of your name, set me not free."

"Had you only threatened me, senora, I would not have cared, but have taken the chances; but, as you threaten those I love, I shall take you to New Orleans with me, and give you up to the authorities," sternly said Irving.

"God bless you, Irving Brandt, for those words, which tell me that I will owe no other kindness to you," was the reply of the woman.

Then Irving unlocked the irons that held Chester Granger, and said simply:

"You are free, and can go on shore as soon as we reach Mobile."

With this he returned to the deck, to find that the Sea Owl was near an anchorage off the Witches' Island.

At the request of Chester Granger, Irving allowed him to accompany him ashore, and taking six of his negro crew with him, he departed in a boat for the shore.

But, search the island as they might, they could not find the slightest trace of the hideous Witch, her wicked son, or the giant guard.

The caverns had been stripped of their ghastly frescoing of human bones, and all had been carried off, or sunk in the sea.

No trace of dog, night-bird, or human being could be seen anywhere—all had gone, and as the little smack and skiffs were nowhere visible, Irving felt that his escape had frightened the old Witch and her companions into flying in haste from the dread isle.

As the yacht moved off a few leagues, upon her way to Mobile, an object was sighted in the water.

Going near, it was seen to be a capsized boat, and upon examination, Irving Brandt pronounced it to be the smack he had seen at the Witches' Island.

"This explains all," he muttered.

"They put to sea in this craft, were caught in the blow that nearly sunk me in my coffin craft, and have gone to the bottom of the sea."

"So let it be, for their fate was more merciful than they deserved."

CHAPTER LI.

CONCLUSION.

TRUE to his promise, upon arriving at Mobile, Irving Brandt released Chester Granger.

The young smuggler officer, however, refused the money the noble middy offered to him, and after a long interview with the Lady Captain, thanked Irving for his life, and went ashore to drift about the world as humor or evil tempted him.

After transacting the business that carried him to Mobile, Irving set sail for New Orleans.

After a rapid run around the coast he arrived off the Balize to discover two vessels just entering the river ahead of him.

They were none other than the schooner, Sea Ghoul, and the Sea Fox.

The former showed signs of having been in a hot action, and there were wounds on the Sea Fox, too.

Upon the deck of the latter vessel, as the lugger ran close up to her, Irving recognized Captain Palafox, who hailed:

"Ho, the lugger!"

"How are you, my gallant Planter Middy?—for I recognized you on the Sea Owl's deck half an hour ago."

"Well, I thank you, captain; but what has happened?"

"Oh, the pirates cut out the Sea Ghoul from her anchorage off the navy dock, and I sighted her and gave chase, ran her down, and they escaped to the shore in their boats after setting her on fire."

"But I boarded her and extinguished the flames, and now she is my prize."

"Bravo for you, Captain Palafox," cried Irving, and the three vessels now ran on up the river together and dropped anchor off the Government quarters, and Rita, the beautiful smuggler, soon found herself the inmate of a guard-house, from whence, after a fair trial, she was taken to a prison cell, sentenced for life for her many crimes.

She made no defense, simply took her sentence in silence, and passed into the gloom of the prison walls.

Captain Palafox was made a Gulf guard, in his schooner, and his daughter, Myrtle, still a school-girl, went with Bradford Carr and his beautiful wife, Maud Brandt, to dwell at the grand old plantation home, on the beautiful shores of Mississippi Sound.

To his old home Colonel Brandt also accompanied them, and far from the temptations of the Palace of Chance, settled down to a life of comfort, if not of happiness, for "the still small voice of conscience" would prick him for his past deeds, which, though hidden from the world's eye, he could not forget.

Rudolpho, the money-lender, again failing in his plot, and with Rita, the one woman of his love, in prison for life, decided to make good his bride, and to worship it as long as he lived, and so he told Captain Merte Monte, when he returned to the city, after his narrow escape from hanging, which would have been his fate, had he not grounded the Sea Ghoul and escaped in his boats to the shore.

"I'll go back to the gambling-table again, for it is the safest," said Captain Merte Monte—and he did.

And Irving Brandt, the young Planter Midshipman?

His career was a brilliant one, and he lived to a ripe old age, honored and loved by all, but dearer than all for him was the love of Myrtle, his beautiful wife, and who was at one time the daughter of an Ocean Guerrilla.

THE END.

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